

# GOLD AND THORNS



MAX  
RITTENBERG



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"GOLD AND THORNS".







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BY

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*"Swirling Waters," "The Mind-Reader," "The Cockatoo,"  
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## CHAPTER I.

### WHO'S WHO.

THIS chapter is dull. So I realise after looking it over. It is compounded of history, personal appearances, and psychology, dissolved in a tincture of moralising. If I were the reader, I should be inclined to treat it with the giant's stride—touching a sentence or two on each page and skipping the rest—until I came to the real story in Chapter II.

Yet, as the writer, a tyrannous conscientiousness drives me to preliminary explanations. A demon of tidiness compels me to build up a scaffolding of the past—so far as I know it—against that pleasant-mannered, slightly foppish, *dilettante* figure of Sir Ralph Kenrick whom I first met at Monte Carlo in the rose-flush of his career. On that occasion I had not the remotest idea of his profession. His

Mayfair drawl, his clipped g's, his air of having on his hands all the time between then and eternity, caused me to label him as a young man of fashion with more money than brains—a pleasant companion on the superficial plane of ordinary acquaintanceship, but not a man to suspect or fear or guard against.

The second occasion of meeting was many years afterwards, on the Island, in his life's twilight ; and then it was that I learnt the story here to be set forth. That there are gaps in the tale is inevitable. He told me only of the high lights, the moments of his career that remained in his memory as "worth while." I have set them out with what writer's skill I may possess, translating his own straightforward narrative into the media of dialogue and description. Possibly I have exaggerated in some places, understated in others.

He did not tell me of the humdrum parts of his career, the long lulls between the storms of adventure ; and I have not attempted to pad the tale by imagining them in detail. In general it is easy to conceive of the trio—Sir Ralph Kenrick and Renie, his wife, and Laroche, his Corsican manservant—drifting around with the tide of the leisured rich from season-resort to season-resort, sun-chasing, pleasure-chasing, health-chasing. In winter, the Riviera or Italy or Egypt or that fashionable fringe of the Desert which provides *hotels du premier ordre* within footing of wild barbarity ; in summer, Trouville or Ostend or Scheveningen ; for the waters, Aix or Vichy, Baden or Marienbad ; and in between,

the conventional round of Ascot and Henley, Goodwood, Cowes, and the moors, the Grand Prix at Paris and Easter at Rome.

An idle, luxurious, expensive life, needing a man's size income, earned or unearned, to finance it.

His was earned, every penny of it, by keen brain-work and subtle planning and audacious doing. The money was of his own making, and so was his title. The baronetcy of Kenrick was described in Debrett as "extinct." John Hallard commandeered it for his own, ready to bring forward, to whom would pry or delve, a long story of his claim backed by a formidable range of documents. And since he was ready and willing to pay his tax for armorial bearings, the British Government had no interest in gainsaying him. His only opponent in respect of the title was a faddist society of baronets organised by a certain ridiculous person who wished to insist on the ancient glory of the baronetcy, and summarily withdraw his patronage from any tradesman who dared to address him in writing as "Dear Sir" instead of "Sir Baronet." This pompous personage tilted many a lance against the windmill of the revived Kenrick baronetcy; but the fashionable world in general merely laughed and took John Hallard at his own valuation.

Yet by birth, on one side, his status was considerably more elevated. His father, so he told me—and I have independent reason to believe that the statement was true—was the Earl of ——. His mother, of humble origin, yielded herself without the protective bond of legal marriage, and when the



Earl's infatuation had run its rapid course, the inevitable ending to the "romance" was the cold procedure of the lawyer's office and a "suitable settlement."

John Hallard never came into personal contact with his father, and he studiously avoided the relatives on his father's side. It was, perhaps, the feeling of being defrauded of his birthright that set him to turn his wits against society and gain by *escroquerie* what he had lost by the trickery of the law.

Undoubtedly his queer code of honour was largely derived from the paternal origin. He made of his profession of crook a game with rules of chivalry, such as in an earlier day another outlaw, Robin Hood, had coded for himself. Hallard went for big game, men who could afford the despoiling, men whose wits and public position gave to the adventure the zest of sport. He and Renie did not pluck the weak-minded fool; nor did they steal from the needy; nor did they ever descend to the coward's game of blackmail. In the seething underworld of society more money is probably acquired by blackmail than by all other forms of roguery totalled together. In this respect Hallard kept clean hands—not from want of opportunity, but because of that tradition of honour which he inherited.

Apart from those exceptions, he played tag with the laws of civilisation, until one country after another became, in the usual colloquialism, "too hot to hold him." It must always be so with the

crook. The law may be defied successfully for years, but in the long run no single man is powerful enough in wits and character to stand against it. The law moves slowly, creakingly ; but with deadly sureness. Its slowly outstretching hand must work eventually on the nerves of the most daring or the most callous crook. In whatever part of the world he may operate, the hand gropes to find him and clutch him by the collar.

Of his early life, Hallard told me little. I have a rough impression of his mother, good soul, stinting herself to provide him with an education at a famous public school ; and with the ultimate self-sacrifice, keeping away from his new-found friends when his station in life had been raised above hers, so that he might not be ashamed of her. She died, I believe, when he was just twenty, and preparing, at her wish, for the career of a lawyer. He hated the idea of living inside the coward's castle of the law. After her death, he broke away into the path his temperament dictated.

The other big factor in his life was Renie. When I met them at Monte Carlo, already married a year or so, she was a charming little woman, *petite* and *piquante* in the inimitable French style, gracefully slim, animated, excellent company. I could see, of course, that she was half-French, though her English accent was admirable ; but I should never have guessed that he had married her from behind the counters of a jewellery establishment of the Rue de la Paix. He had summed her up as a woman in a million. That may have been the partiality of

the lover, but it was certainly true that he could not have found a more fitting mate. A week after marriage, he told me, he summoned up his courage to make his confession to her.

"You have never asked me my profession," he said.

"I thought you had no profession," she replied.

I picture him looking her straight in the eye, very searchingly, as he made his statement, for how she would take it would mean very much to him.

"I am a crook," he said.

Undoubtedly he ought to have told her before marriage. Under no code of ethics should he have kept back that vital confession. Yet a man in love is scarcely in a normal state of mind—blinder in some respects, more keenly intuitive in others—and to be strictly just one ought, perhaps, to judge his actions only by their resultants. If his acts justify themselves in the outcome, then we must admit the triumph of intuition over logic.

"I am a crook."

And her answer came: "*Chéri*, I had suspected it before we married. And I don't care! I love you—what does the rest matter? But tell me why you make your money like that. You have some good reason—you fight society, *n'est-ce pas?*"

That was typical of Renie. She was a true help-mate as well as a wife to Hallard. They became close partners in the planning of *coups* and in the execution. She adapted herself wonderfully to his life in the whirl of the leisured rich, making herself indeed a Lady Kenrick. Yet Renie had her very



human limitations. Her husband's easy, pleasant manner made him quick friendships amongst women, and this many a time roused her angry jealousy. It was difficult for her to believe that he wished to use these women's friendships solely for the furtherance of professional ends. Of the lulls and the storms of his career, Renie preferred the tumult of adventure, when her husband's safety was often dependent on her own quick wits and daring. Yet, while the spirit was very willing, the flesh was weak. The life told on her nerves far quicker than on Hallard's.

The third of the trio, Laroche, was Corsican-born a mountain-dweller and a relative of outlaw brigands. Hallard had met him in the very early days of his career, when he had bungled a *coup* with a rich English tourist at Ajaccio, and had to fly for immediate safety to the *maquis*. He was forced to live in hiding for many months until the quest of the local police had died away, and it was then that he formed the friendship with Laroche. A tall, distinguished, silent fellow was this latter, as I saw him first at Monte Carlo, a perfect manservant and devoted to his master with a dog-like faithfulness.

Their relationship was much more than of master and servant. He had helped Hallard in all his adventures of *escroquerie*, carrying out orders with precision and courage and blind obedience. Hallard gave him always a percentage of the spoils, which Laroche liked to invest in wild-cat stocks and shares and dubious premium bonds offering loud prospects of fortune.

A trio of outlaws, and all three loving the Game !

One point more, demands the demon of tidiness, before I can step aside from the stage into the wings and allow the curtain to rise on the quick-changing scenes of Hallard's career of artistic crime. Why should he tell me, a mere acquaintance, of matters which could obviously lay him open to the penalties of the law ? He was, for one point, fairly safe on the Island from the reach of Justice. But it was chiefly, I think, for reasons of vanity—or to put it less crudely, from pride in professional achievements. One great drawback of a crook's career is that his masterwork has to be kept secret. He carries out a *coup* which deserves the comparative immortality of print, and he has perforce to hide it. Splendid schemes and glorious risks—and no applause for them ! That, I fancy, was the way John Hallard felt.

Now I, as a writer, could put his exploits into print. So he gave me the essence of what is here set forth.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE KNOWING SMILE OF THE BANKER.

**M**ONSIEUR OCTAVE BOURDION, banker of Nice and Monte Carlo, was Napoleonesque.

Several times in the Salles de Jeux Hallard had noted him standing away from the crowd in the Bonaparte attitude—legs straddled, arms folded tightly, chin sunk deep on his chest—with a smile of infinite wisdom playing around his beady eyes. A stocky, paunchy figure of a man, with that solidity of pose which goes with a comfortable foundation of shares, bonds, mortgages, and the rest of the financier outfit.

Monsieur Octave Bourdion had good reason for his knowing smile. He was a heavy shareholder in the Casino, and held substantial interest in the Sporting Club of Nice and other money-coining ventures along the Côte d'Azur. Himself, he never gambled on the tables. That was a game for the pigeons !

That knowing smile roused Hallard's sporting instincts to the full. Here was a man worth pitting oneself against in a contest of wits.

"Renie," he whispered to his wife, "to-night we play pigeon. We'll run a martingale system on one of the *transversales*, like any raw plunger with more money than sense."

Renie smiled understanding, and glanced around the Salle Schmidt to see what game was to be stirred from the coverts.

"That Napoleon of finance standing over there by the pillar," whispered her husband.

"A man like that! Oh, *chéri*, you mustn't run risks! He looks as if he knew every move on the board."

"The men who do know don't show it," retorted Hallard, more to reassure her than because he believed in the aphorism.

So they selected a table well under the eye of Monsieur Octave Bourdion, and began to "play pigeon." For the evening that was their sole task, to plant a tiny impression in the mind of the knowing banker looking on with satirical satisfaction at the carnival of greed and stupidity which helped to thrust money into his own pockets.

The following afternoon Hallard rushed hatless out of the Casino and up to the banking establishment of Octave Bourdion et Cie. Perhaps you may know it—an imposing building on the farther side of those velvet-pile lawns which sweep down to the main entrance of the Casino and form part of its theatrical setting.

"I must see Monsieur Bourdion at once—the matter is vital!" demanded Hallard in French of the cashier.



This hatlessness and air of urgency on the part of a rich young *flâneur* impressed the clerk, and without delay the client was shown into the private sanctum of the financier. He had excellent taste in office apartments—this Monsieur Bourdion. It was more like a château study than a banker's office. Fine pictures on the walls, over light-oak panelling; comfortable padded chairs drawn up cosily around small occasional tables; chandeliers *nouveau art*; embroidered curtains by the windows in royal blue and silver; a bronze statuette of Napoleon on the mantelpiece.

"Monsieur Bourdion," said Hallard without ceremony, hardly allowing time to shake hands, "I want two thousand louis at once. Now, on the spot!"

The banker smiled at that boyish impatience. He answered in correct but somewhat early Victorian English:

"Please be seated, monsieur, and permit me a few necessary questions. Your name, and the security you propose to offer for this loan?"

"I've no security. I'm nearly cleaned out. My wife and I are playin' a martingale on the *transversale* seven, eight, nine; and the damned numbers have never turned up all day! Of course they must come out some time. I've left my wife in charge of the system, and rushed up here to get two thousand louis from you. My name's Sir Ralph Kenrick, and of course in London or Paris I could lay my hand on twenty thousand louis at a moment's notice."

Bourdion looked him over slowly and shrewdly, and remarked :

“ Monsieur will permit me to say that his request is scarcely one that a prudent banker would comply with without investigation. You make certain statements to me as to your position and means, but——”

At this, Hallard exploded with impatience. He ransacked his pockets and threw on the table a couple of blank cheques, his cigarette-case engraved with his name, an entry ticket to the baccarat rooms at the Villa des Fleurs at Aix, a couple of old envelopes, and a dunning letter from a London tailor—the most ridiculous proofs of identity that a would-be borrower ever offered.

Bourdion smiled his knowing smile, and waved them aside.

“ I have seen you playing at the tables, monsieur, but I regret that I could not advance you——”

Hallard snatched up a telephone without ceremony.

“ Get me on the trunk wire to Paris ! ” he called to the operator. “ I want Paris two hundred and eight, seventy-seven, the banking house of Edwardes, Coldred and Company.”

Then he turned triumphantly to the financier.

“ That’s my Paris bank. Speak to them yourself as soon as the connection is made. Ask them if I’m good for two thousand, three thousand, five thousand louis. Ask them if they will identify me on the ’phone. Ask them anything you like. Come,

Monsieur Bourdion, you're a man of the world. Is it likely that I should come to borrow two thousand louis from you without security, unless I were really Sir Ralph Kenrick? The thing would be ridiculous, childish!"

The smile died out of the banker's face. He waited impassively for the connection to be made. His mind was chewing over the question: "Is this fellow a clumsy swindler, or merely a rich young fool?"

Some twenty minutes later, his enquiries fully satisfied, he had handed two thousand louis in notes to Hallard.

"I wish you the best of luck at the tables!" he said as he bowed him out, and the knowing smile was now replaced by one of apparently great friendliness.

Hallard read it as meaning: "A rich young fool—more grist for my Casino mill!"

The two thousand louis were, of course, wired at once from the Paris bank to the firm of Octave Bourdion et Cie. When Hallard sat down to play the big game with a shrewd financier, he did not lay "Bank of Engraving" notes on the table. No, he played the game with real money. That was merely a preliminary in the work of stirring up confidence.

The following evening there came a very cordial invitation to Bourdion to dine with Sir Ralph Kenrick and his wife at the Café de Paris, and do the Russian ballet after. Renie put out all her charms; flattered him with superb artistry; left

him at the end of the evening ten years younger. Where women were concerned, the financier plainly considered himself a second Napoleon.

"A rich young fool with an altogether delightful wife. I must see more of them, especially the latter."

That was the summary in the mind of Monsieur Octave Bourdion which Hallard sensed. He read it from the way the banker helped Renie with her opera cloak in the Atrium of the Casino when he was apparently turning away to glance at the notorious Contessa del R——

During the next few days Bourdion contrived to see a great deal of them. While Hallard was busy racing his *Flying Fish* at the motor-boat meet, the banker very kindly looked after Renie, who professed herself bored by motor-boat races. He took her motoring among the Alpes Maritimes; he showed her over the wonderful oceanographic museum erected by the Prince of Monaco; he showed her the magnificent vaults of his bank, of which he was very proud.

The bank clerks seemed much interested in their chief's fair visitor.

"And now?" asked Renie of her husband, in the privacy of their own rooms.

"And now we leave Monte. We've planted the seeds of confidence in the mind of Monsieur Octave Bourdion, and we allow them time to germinate. After six months or so we return to renew our acquaintance with the Napoleon of finance, if you are willing."

Renie held out her arms to her husband, and there was a beautiful tenderness in her voice as she said :

“ *Chéri*, of course I am willing. Whither thou goest, I go also.”



## CHAPTER III.

### BURIED TREASURE.

HALLARD carried this as a professional maxim :  
“For a big *coup*, select a would-be knave rather than an honest man.” In essence, all the multitudinous variations of the confidence game depend on the cupidity and dishonest propensities of the victim. In the crudest form of the manœuvre, a benevolent-looking gentleman approaches an absolute stranger and mentions that he has many thousand pounds to dispose of in charity. Will the stranger help him to do so ? The latter, hoping to retain a large part of the charity-money for himself, agrees. And so the game starts. It depends essentially on the cupidity of the victim.

In this case of the knowing banker, both sides had been studying one another keenly. Bourdion was without doubt a sporting match for any man of Hallard's profession. He had wide experience of men and events, especially of the very mixed crowd of world and underworld which frequents

the Riviera ; a keen, decisive mind ; determination and physical courage. On Hallard's side was the point that he had summed up the banker as a would-be knave, but the difficulties of the big game made him tingle.

Eight months elapsed before the next visit to Monte Carlo, allowing ample time for preparation. It was December when Sir Ralph Kenrick put up once more in the Principality, at the Hermitage, this time *en garcon*, without Renie or Laroche. As he explained to Bourdion, there are times when one prefers to be without one's wife.

"Precisely, my dear Sir Ralph, precisely !"

"The wife will join me later on ; she's visiting relations in the Ardèche. She asked to be remembered to you."

The banker bowed to hide a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes.

"A thousand thanks ! Please be so good as to convey to her my very respectful salutations."

Hallard nodded carelessly, and then took his arm in confidential fashion.

"There's an important matter which is worryin' me considerably just now. I wonder if you'd give me the benefit of your advice ?"

He looked around at the strollers on the terrace promenade, and hesitated.

The financier suggested his private office, and when they were comfortably settled in his luxurious arm-chairs, Hallard took out from an inner pocket a time-faded document and handed it to his host.

The latter looked at it keenly, with the searching eye of a banker, read it through, and asked :

"What does it mean—this list? Jewels, plate, jewels. Is it your idea to dispose of some heirlooms?"

"They're not mine—I only wish they were."

"Whose?"

"That's the puzzle. At one time they belonged to Napoleon. Now, I suppose, they more or less belong to the Marquis de Mas d'Aloriac, or perhaps to the French Government. Have you a treasure-trove law over here like we have in England?"

Monsieur Bourdion's mouth tightened, and his features composed themselves to inscrutability.

"Be so good as to explain," he said.

It was a long explanation, told confusedly and without the lucid skill of the man of affairs. In brief it amounted to this: Hallard stated that he had unearthed the document at his country home in England, which was formerly in possession of a family of French exiles. The paper was a list of treasures cached by Napoleon's orders on the barren Ile St. Jérôme off the Golfe Juan, where Napoleon landed on the return from Elba. At that time it was doubtful whether the French nation would rally round him, and the cached treasure was probably some form of prudent reserve fund. Why it had remained in its hiding-place Hallard could not profess to explain. But there it was.

"I ran over to the Ile St. Jérôme in my *Flyin' Fish* a few nights ago, and found it in the place described in another of these old papers. Now the

island belongs, I'm told, to an old Gascon fellow—Cyprien, fifth Marquis de Mas d'Aloriac—who seems to live a hermit life somewhere in the Pyrenees. I don't suppose that he has the ghost of a notion that a treasure worth a hundred thousand pounds at least, according to this list, is buried on his land. What ought I to do?"

The banker questioned and cross-questioned at great length, with a hard glitter in his beady eyes.

Hallard repeated his difficulty: "If I were to manage to buy the island from him, would all this treasure be legally mine? And even then, would it be playin' the game? On the other hand, my knowledge ought to entitle me to some share in the treasure."

Then Hallard made a confession. He had contrived to break open one of the chests, and had brought away some of the hidden store. And with that he drew out from the inner pocket a bracelet and a necklace of pearls that to the expert eye clearly belonged to the Louis Quatorze period. He ticked them off on the list.

Bourdion's gimlet eyes screwed into his visitor while the latter was handling the document. Finally he said: "Your question is too difficult a one to answer offhand. Suppose you were to take me in your motor-boat to the Ile St. Jérôme, and let me see for myself how things lie?"

"If you'd like."

The banker fingered the bracelet and necklace casually. "You ought not to carry these about with you in a place like Monte Carlo. Would you

care for me to put them in a safe deposit meanwhile ? ”

Hallard made no demur, and the banker drew out from his desk the customary safe-deposit receipt-book and had his visitor sign it in the usual way as *owner* and depositing party. That signature could, if he desired it, send Hallard to prison.

It was characteristic prudence on the part of Monsieur Bourdion.

A little after midnight, guided by the five-second flashing light on St. Honorat, they picked out St. Jérôme from the velvety darkness that blankets sea and sky on a moonless night by the softly sensuous Côte d’Azur. Not far distant, Cannes strung out a necklace of lights from La Bocca to La Croisette, and the hills behind were pin-pointed with stars from the villas on their slopes.

Hallard took his motor-boat at a crawl round the jagged edge of the island, past the ruined château, and over to the western end. There he brought her close to the shore, in a cove where the scrub-pines and balsam-scented brushwood scramble for the sparse soil between the red rocks.

Bourdion had said very little on the run from Monte Carlo to the Isle. He held himself correctly impassive and judicial, and what was passing in his mind was unreadable. Hallard began to fear that when they came to the treasure, the banker would shy at “lifting” it ; that he had underrated the honesty of this financier.

The cache had been cunningly devised. Buried under a heavy rock were some huge iron-bound



chests, the smallest and least formidable of which had been pried open on a previous visit.

"*Voilà !*" said Hallard, with a gesture inviting the banker to examine for himself.

Bourdion plunged his hands inside and drew out some heavy gold-plate of antique pattern. He drew his breath in between his teeth as he held the heavy plate in his hands, feeling the weight of it and mentally assessing its value. Then suddenly he drew himself together with a start.

"What's that? Listen!" he flashed in an imperious whisper.

There were steps in the brushwood not far away. They were approaching steadily. Some one was coming in their direction.

With a quickness and liteness that one would scarcely have given him credit for, Bourdion laid down the plate and crept away to where the rocks led down to the cove, stepping with the carefulness of a cat. Hallard followed him without question. Arrived at the cove, the banker stood up boldly on the sky-line with his legs apart, arms tightly folded and chin sunk deep in his chest, looking out over the velvety-black sea—the Napoleonesque attitude.

The footsteps approached. Bourdion took no notice of them. Finally a voice said sharply :

"*Messieurs*, to what do I owe the honour of this visit ? "

They turned round, and an astonishing figure met their gaze—an old man with white hair, white moustache and white imperial, very tall and erect and aristocratic in bearing, and dressed in the fashion

of fifty years ago. In his hand was an amber-headed cane with silken tassels depending from it. He drew his brows together into a frown, and asked again :

“*Messieurs*, what brings you to my island at this hour of the night ? ”

Bourdion rose to the occasion magnificently.

“*Monsieur le Marquis*,” he answered, “I must express our deep apologies at this apparently unwarrantable intrusion. I take it that I am addressing *Monsieur le Marquis de Mas d’Aloriac* ? ”

The old aristocrat bowed a stiff assent.

“I had, of course, no idea that the island was inhabited. My visit here is on behalf of the Prince of Monaco. As you are no doubt well aware, His Serene Highness is an ardent student of oceanography. To aid his researches, he is very desirous of erecting a biological station on one of these islands. *St. Jérôme* is particularly suited to his purpose, and he had asked me, as his financial adviser, to study the cost of the scheme. Hence my intrusion, for which I offer you a thousand apologies.”

The banker had skilfully evaded the point that it was well after midnight—an odd time for a visit of inspection. But there was smooth deference in his tone.

With grave courtesy the Marquis suggested that they should come to his ruined château—where, he informed them, he still kept a couple of living-rooms in being—and partake of a glass of wine.

Bourdion told the Marquis his real name, and

began to chat with him in a particularly smooth and friendly way. In a very few minutes it became clear to Hallard what was the scheme underlying the talk. Now that the cache was left exposed, the Marquis might stumble upon it at any moment. Hence the necessity for immediate action. And when the wine had mellowed the interview sufficiently, the shrewd financier came to his point.

"It is extremely fortunate for me," he said, "that I have been able to meet you in this unexpected fashion. It saves me a lengthy journey to your home in the Pyrenees. I have decided to advise the Prince that this island is well adapted to his special needs, and I can take it on myself to make you a substantial offer for it."

But the Marquis raised objection.

"I am of the old school," said he, "and I do not care to mingle hospitality with the discussion of monetary affairs. Let us leave such matters to the daytime and the lawyer's office."

Bourdion took up another of his Napoleonesque poses.

"Decision is a habit with me," he replied in the grand manner. "I owe my success to the rapidity with which I form my judgments. To-night, I am ready to buy. To-morrow, I might decide otherwise."

The old aristocrat frowned a little over this, but after a few moments of thought assented.

The negotiations were not protracted. The financier was shrewd enough to see that any haggling over price would offend against the dignity of his

host and probably put an end to the affair. Accordingly, when the Marquis named the round sum of five hundred thousand francs—twenty thousand pounds—he did not urge a lower sum, but offered half payment by immediate cheque, and the remaining half when the lawyers had formally investigated the title-deeds and made the requisite transfers. In the meantime, he carefully drew up a temporary agreement of sale which fully protected himself in law, and then took out a blank cheque from his wallet.

Hallard drew the banker aside for a moment, and whispered :

“I don’t quite see where I come in on this deal.”

“You may trust to me, my dear friend,” replied Bourdion, patting him on the shoulder reassuringly. “Believe me, this is the only possible course to protect our mutual interests.”

One special point the Marquis made as Bourdion started to fill in his cheque for ten thousand pounds.

“I have a strong prejudice against personal business dealings with the banks of the present Republican régime,” he said. “I am of the old school, and look for a speedy restoration of the Royal House. Please be good enough to make your cheque an open one to bearer.”

“It is a matter of indifference to me,” answered Bourdion, with a covert smile at this absurd touch of Royalist sentiment, and drew out the cheque accordingly.

The old aristocrat courteously insisted on walking down to the cove and seeing his guests depart. He

stood there, a strange figure of the dead past, until the motor-boat was swallowed up in the velvety night.

"We will cruise around till nearly daybreak," said Bourdion to Hallard. "By that time the Marquis will be soundly asleep. Then I want you to take me back to St. Jérôme and help me to remove the chests. Legally, they are now mine, but for safety's sake I prefer to have them under my hands."

His prudence was admirable.

\* \* \* \* \*

In a cold dawn, with a sea-mist wrapping its dripping veilings around them, they made St. Jérôme again, and after an infinity of trouble, managed to transfer the iron-bound cases to the boat.

There was a smile of intense satisfaction in the beady eyes of the financier as they made off to the open Mediterranean with the precious cargo on board. His procedure had been admirably legal; his position was entirely secure. The agreement of sale had been cunningly worded so as to leave a loophole for his lawyers to cancel the transaction, legitimately, should he find on examination that the treasure did not come up to his expectations.

But for Hallard all this prudence was not so admirable. He fidgeted and coughed uneasily, and finally shut off power and turned to the banker.

"My dear fellow," said he, "you must excuse my persistency, but we really ought to settle where I come in in this transaction."



"Certainly, certainly!" returned the financier blandly. "What I propose is this: Let us get the cases ashore, examine their contents, value them, and then decide on what share you ought to receive. Of course I recognise that you are morally entitled to a certain proportion of——"

"The proportion can be settled now!" cut in Hallard sharply.

And then things began to happen which he certainly had not reckoned upon.

"You will take this boat into Monaco!" snapped the banker, with a glittering revolver levelled at his companion. "And at full speed! On your behaviour between here and the harbour of Monaco depends whether I shall make use of a certain deposit-receipt you very rashly signed for property not your own!"

All the blandness had gone utterly from his voice, and Hallard realised with a jerk that the levelled revolver was no idle threat. The man was stark dangerous. Out on that mist-veiled stretch of water, hidden from human sight, any scruples would be ruthlessly thrust aside.

Hallard inwardly anathematised himself for his under-estimation of the banker's calibre. As an essential part of his plan, he had relied on Bourdion's infatuation for Renie to make easy any demand for advance payment on the treasure. He had judged that the banker would place the hoodwinking of a husband before the acquisition of money. And now there had come a rude awakening. Having been used, he was to be thrown aside. To take the

*Flying Fish* straight to Monaco and set the banker ashore with the treasure-chests would be ruin for the big scheme.

At such times a man does a world of hard thinking in a fractional space of time. Inside a couple of seconds Hallard had his new rôle mentally sketched out, and with an assumption of cowed obedience, he started the engine. From the direction of the slowly-drifting mist-wraiths, his keen senses told him that they must have turned slightly off their course during the stoppage--and there lay the chance. He knew it, but did Bourdion?

He would drive full speed ahead, as ordered, and gradually edge off the wheel little by little. If Bourdion did not suspect, and the new rôle lay in keeping him from suspecting, they would be half-way to the coast of Corsica before the sun had chased away the mists. That would give time, and time was of ruby value that morning. Then, out on the open sea, he might be able to play a trick or two with the engine which would hold them prisoner for hours.

But Bourdion's wits were also keenly on the stretch. Presently he became suspicious, although there was no sight of land to influence him, and curtly ordered Hallard to fetch him a compass from out of the fore-locker where it was kept stowed away. The levelled revolver made his order imperative.

Hallard obeyed.

And then, when the situation was at its blackest, Hallard's luck--like most of his profession he was a

firm believer in his lucky star—came full tilt upon him. Out of the fog rose a black shape feeling its way through the veiling, and Bourdion shouted with a sudden shrill fear for Hallard to steer them away from danger.

The adventurer knew when to grasp an opportunity. In a fraction of a second he had decided to risk the menace of the revolver. Holding grimly to the wheel, he drove straight on to the black hull ahead of them.

The poor *Flying Fish*! It was her last trip. She crashed her nose into the steel hull of the Nice-Corsica mail packet, crumpled up like an egg-shell, and went down to her grave in the open Mediterranean. Both of her passengers jumped clear. Life-belts were thrown to them, and presently a boat was lowered to pick them up, feeling its way through the mist.

Hallard heard the shoutings that testified to the fact that the banker had been picked up, but he swam silently away in the fog to where he judged the coast-line around Nice must lie, some five miles away.

It was a big risk to take—a tremendous risk in that white shroud of mist which might easily prove a death-shroud.

Yet he had weighed up chances, and decided to swim for it. They would search about for him and waste nearly an hour before they gave him up for drowned. Then the mail-boat would proceed on her way to Corsica, the banker on board, and it might be ten o'clock before he could get to a

telegraph wire. If there was one thing that might be reckoned upon with certainty, it was that Monsieur Octave Bourdion, with his treasure at the bottom of the Mediterranean, would send an imperative message to his bank to hold up the cheque he had given to the Marquis de Mas d'Aloriac.

But to have that message delayed until ten o'clock would be infinitely precious. It would give time—the time for which Hallard played in that dare-devil resolve to wreck the *Flying Fish* and swim for shore. Time was vital for the safety of Renie.

\* \* \* \* \*

“ But how could it affect your wife ? ” I had asked at this point in Hallard's own narrative to me.

He replied : “ At eight o'clock that morning the banking establishment of Octave Bourdion and Co., at Monte Carlo, opened its doors as usual for business. At eight-fifteen Renie presented an open cheque to bearer for ten thousand pounds. The sum was a very large one for an open cheque, but the clerk counted out the money for my wife without hesitation. He drew his own conclusions. Probably it was not the first time he had honoured a cheque from Monsieur Octave Bourdion in favour of a lady.

“ At nine o'clock Renie was in a jewellery establishment at Nice turning her ten thousand pounds into uncut jewels. Before ten she was safely on her way to Paris in a *rapide de luxe*.”

“ But the Marquis de Mas d'Aloriac—the owner of the island of St. Jérôme ? ” I enquired, a trifle

bewildered. "I thought the cheque was in his possession?"

Hallard pointed to a tall, erect, dignified figure in the grounds of the bungalow—his manservant Laroche.

"Allow me to introduce you," he said, "to Cyprien, fifth Marquis de Mas d'Aloriac."

"And the 'treasure'?"

"The genuine part of it—the bracelet, necklace, and plate—stood me in for seven or eight hundred pounds. The rest was rock and earth."

"And when Bourdion found out how he had been tricked?"

"Probably he decided to keep quiet and save his own reputation for sagacity."



## CHAPTER IV.

### ON BOARD THE "ARIADNE."

"*C*<sup>HERI</sup>, did you notice that diamond necklace Mrs. Eames was wearing to-night?" asked Renie of her husband as they stood alone on the bows of the steam-yacht *Ariadne*, cleaving its way along the stately coast-line of the eastern Adriatic on a February cruise around the Mediterranean.

"Of course," returned Hallard.

"It's white zircon cut to imitate diamond," added Renie with the certainty of expert knowledge. She knew jewels as intimately as a shepherd his sheep—recognising tiny points of difference that are non-existent to the untrained eye of the outsider. "The sparkle is a fine imitation of brilliants, but the cutting angles are different. Poirier, of Paris, does that kind of thing to perfection."

"How could I distinguish?"

"Zircon won't cut diamond, *chéri*."

The adventurer was lost in thought for many minutes, and Renie did not interrupt. The deep sympathy between them made explanations unnecessary. She knew well that his keen brain was seeking for some scheme whereby to turn her information to account.

They had taken this Mediterranean cruise on the *Ariadne* for strictly professional reasons. The yacht always carries a number of sufficiently wealthy passengers, and where wealth is focussed, there opportunities exist for the man whose wits are his livelihood.

On board ship strangers are thrown into especially close contact, and acquaintances can be made with ease. All this was promising, but so far Hallard had found no opening. From England to Gib, to Malta, to Venice, had been the course, and though more than a fortnight had elapsed and friendly relations between the passengers were in full swing, no opportunity worth the taking had shown itself.

On the passenger list they were, of course, entered as Sir Ralph and Lady Kenrick and valet. Renie had no maid in her service. She wisely distrusted maids.

"Mrs. Eames doesn't look the kind of woman to wear imitation jewellery, if she knew it," mused Hallard, half to himself. "There's something peculiar behind. . . . Fishy. . . . Who is she?"

"I'm told she was the Hon. Vivien Lennersley, a society beauty and an heiress. Eames was the

dashing young Guardsman when he married her. Now——"

"Whisky," was Hallard's curt summing-up of the situation. The man's bloated, sodden face stood out in his mental vision—the wreck of a once handsomely-florid soldier. "And he thinks he can play cards."

\* \* \* \* \*

The chief duty of a ship's purser is, of course, to be a social M.C. This is especially so on such a boat as the *Ariadne*, which carries no other cargo than pleasure-seekers. Geoffrey Wilmer had been chosen for his post by the owners of the *Ariadne* because he had pleasant, easy manners; could talk pleasantly with bores and cranks as well as with pretty women; could play cards, quoits, and so on in a well-bred, pleasant way.

The adventurer began his investigation in indirect fashion by cultivating Geoffrey Wilmer. There was little difficulty for such a man as Hallard in getting on very friendly, intimate terms with this easy-going, somewhat ingenuous young fellow. Soon he had obtained several valuable pointers regarding the Hon. Mrs. Eames, Major Eames, and others of the ship's party. Particularly was he interested in Count Ratislaw, an Austrian, who had come on board at Malta, and who occupied a cabin opposite to his own. The Count was with the Eameses, and had evidently known them for some time. He was a man of thirty-five to forty, with an extraordinarily silky smoothness of manner and appearance that was too impeccable to be pleasant.

As Hallard remarked to the young purser : " He's the sort of a man you would find at the end of a three-day railway journey with impeccably-creased trousers, impeccably-sleeked hair, and impeccably-creamed complexion."

Wilmer laughed boyishly. " That hits him off all right. But he's good company—plays a rattling good game of cards, and all that sort of thing."

" Too good."

" Why ? "

Hallard led him to one of the portholes of the smoking-room. Inside, at one of the tables in the corner, Count Ratislaw and Major Eames were playing piquet—the latter flushed with whisky, although it was early in the afternoon, and every now and again swearing viciously at the cursed luck of the cards.

Hallard looked at the young purser significantly.

Said the latter apologetically : " Well, it's none of my business, you know. I can't interfere in that sort of thing."

" Together we can," said Hallard in a low voice.

" How ? "

" Butt in. Protect him from himself. Come with me and follow my lead."

They sat down by the piquet-table and watched the hands in silence for some time. At the end of a game, Hallard suggested with a pleasant assurance that carried no suggestion of intrusion that they should make up a four at bridge. The Major agreed—piquet had gone badly for him, and he was glad of a change of occupation suggested from

outside. Count Ratislaw agreed with silky politeness.

"The usual shilling points, ees eet not?" he asked as he riffled the cards with wonderful smoothness.

"Penny points for me," said Hallard easily.

"Same for me," chimed in Wilmer, following the lead.

Count Ratislaw's voice was still silky, as he replied: "Ees eet worth playing for so leetle?"

"I play the game for the sake of the game," returned Hallard. "The usual penny points lend quite enough money interest to it. Afterwards, if you want a money gamble, I'll cut cards with you for a thousand pounds a cut."

The Austrian smiled smoothly, but did not take up the challenge. Instead, he turned to Major Eames with a peculiar penetration of look.

The latter squirmed uncomfortably. Clearly, there was a struggle going on in his mind. He was like a bird fascinated by the snake—drawn to it in spite of himself. In his hand were the second pack of cards, and he gripped and ungripped them nervously.

Suddenly he pushed back his chair and snarled out with the sodden voice of the drunkard: "The Count's right! That's a measly game. I don't want your cursed interference!" And he flung the pack on the table and lurched out of the room.

Hallard made no reply. His mind was racing over the possible explanations of this snake and bird situation. Was there, underlying it, some

opportunity for himself? This Count Ratislaw made a fine opponent for a battle of wits. He began to tingle with the zest of a coming fight.

Thereafter, Hallard and his wife kept shrewd watch upon the Eames party. The Count seemed to dog the footsteps of Mrs. Eames beyond even the customary freedom of shipboard life, but how far the Major was aware of it was impossible to say. Most of the waking hours of Major Eames were spent at the card-tables or by the smoking-room bar, and of an evening he would often disappear mysteriously to his cabin and not be seen again until late the next morning.

A strong believer in intuitive perceptions, Hallard felt most strongly that under this situation lay some big opportunity for himself, though it would have been difficult to give cold-blooded reasons for his belief. There could be no making of plans—he could only keep shrewd watch, and wait to grip opportunity the moment it should appear above the surface.

And presently, by sheer accident, a flood of light came upon the Eames-Ratislaw situation. One night of rising wind and lurching sea, when the portholes of every cabin were screwed up tight by orders from the bridge, Hallard on retiring to his cabin found Renie in a blaze of excitement.

In a low, tense voice she whispered to him: "The Count has her necklace."

"But I've just come from Wilmer's cabin—where a few of us have been smoking a last pipe—and I saw him lock that necklace away in his safe.



He keeps it for Mrs. Eames when she's not wearing it."

"I saw it in the Count's hands not twenty minutes ago," replied Renie, and explained in detail. As she had passed down the passage to her cabin, she had noticed the door of the cabin opposite on the latch. This is not unusual on board ship in warm latitudes—especially on a night when portholes are screwed up and a cabin atmosphere is close—but as she passed the door, there came to her through the opening a most startling glimpse of the interior. Reflected from the glass of the shut porthole, backed by a black night of storm, she had seen the Count standing by his dressing-table and running through his hands a splendid diamond necklace.

It was the merest reflected glimpse, but to Renie's trained eye for jewellery there was no doubt as to the identity of the necklace.

"It was hers."

The glint of battle came into Hallard's eyes. "Then that's the one!"

"Unless——"

"Impossible. I saw the imitation one locked away in safe custody. Ratislaw must have the real one."

"Perhaps he made the exchange without the knowledge of the Eameses?"

Hallard considered for a few moments. "I don't think so," he replied. "I see a much more likely explanation. We know he's been friendly with the Major for some time—knew him while at Malta, and probably before that. The Major must

have lost a heap of money to him at cards, and in order to pay up, took his wife's necklace, sent it at the Count's instigation to Paris under pretence of getting it repaired, had an imitation made, and then paid off his debt to Ratislaw with the real one. Yes, that's it ! That explains why the Major knuckles under to him—afraid of his telling Mrs. Eames."

"Blackmail," was Renie's contemptuous comment.

He nodded agreement. "Yes, blackmail without a doubt. Now, if we could pull out the Major from the claws of this silky schemer, we should have a very good case for compensation from the Eameses or their rich relation."

"Should we get much out of it, even if you succeed ?" asked Renie dubiously.

"It's doubtful, but in any case it's a sporting game."

The next evening he managed to draw the Major aside into a quiet corner of the deck, and gradually felt his way towards an understanding. Major Eames had drunk himself into the maudlin, self-pitying state, and seemed to have forgotten his violent outburst of a few days back.

"I'm done for, done for !" he complained piteously. "I don't care what happens to me now. Everyone's against me. No one has any pity for me."

"Why don't you let me help you ?"

"You can't help me. No one can help me."

"The other day I tried to."

"I don't remember."

"When you were playin' piquet with Ratislaw."

A shiver went through the Major's frame. "He's a devil! D—— him!" he jerked out.

"Then why not cut free from him?"

"No, I don't mean that. Ratislaw's a good fellow. He's been a good friend to me. I don't know what I'm saying sometimes. I'm done for, done for!"

To deal with such a will-less wreck required all Hallard's patience.

"You must have lost a pot of money to him over cards," he remarked quietly.

The Major flared up into sudden resentment. "No, I haven't! I can beat him at piquet any day. I've won money from him—look at this IOU if you don't believe me." He fumbled in his pockets and produced an IOU of the Count's for a hundred and fifty pounds.

Hallard gave no sign of astonishment, but this document disturbed him profoundly. It crumpled up all his theory of the Count's hold over the Major. Was it possible that Renie had made a huge mistake? If the necklace in Ratislaw's possession had nothing to do with Major Eames, then all their elaborate deductions went for nothing.

Suppose the Count himself had procured the imitation necklace and exchanged it for the real one!

Hallard rose to leave. "Well, I must be off to join the wife," he said, and then quite casually: "What a stunnin' necklace that is of Mrs. Eames'."

The Major drew himself up with a sudden

accession of sodden dignity. "I won't have my wife's affairs discussed! D--- your interference!"

The situation seemed more tangled than ever. Clearly, it was useless to tackle it from the Major's side. Maudlin as he was, he would not give his confidence beyond a very limited point. He had called the Count "a devil" with one breath, and "a good friend" with the next. Apparently he had not run into debt with Ratislaw over cards, and yet a very harmless compliment about his wife's jewellery had driven him into a ridiculous shell of reserve.

"I must get at the root of it through Ratislaw," said Hallard to Renie in the privacy of their cabin.

"*Chéri*, he looks dangerous! Take care of yourself."

"Where there's no danger, there's no sport."

"Don't run heedless risks. Let's drop this case and try for something easier."

But when Hallard had fastened his teeth into a situation, he was not easily pried loose. Instead of giving up the case, he began to weave a plan of approach to Ratislaw.

The idea that gradually took shape in his mind was this: He would assume that the Count had in his possession the real Eames necklace, since Renie was still positive about its identity. Giving himself out as a keen lover of jewels, he would let Ratislaw know that he was anxious to buy some more and have them made up for his wife's use after the cruise had ended. Then he would mention in a matter-of-course way that he had heard that

Ratislaw had some fine diamonds to dispose of. On the way in which the Count would reply to this would depend his further course of action. One point he had firmly decided upon : not to let matters rest until he knew definitely what was the bond between the Major and the smooth-spoken, crafty Austrian.

With this in view, Hallard continued his friendly footing with the ship's purser. He began to make a habit of dropping into Wilmer's cabin for a good-night pipe before turning into bed. Perhaps the young fellow, who knew every item of ship's gossip, could provide some further pointer which would help him in the big interview he had set himself.

## CHAPTER V

### THE LUCKY BAG

IT was the right course to pursue. For it happened one evening, when Hallard and Wilmer were alone in the latter's cabin, and the purser was as usual clearing up his day's business papers and locking away in the safe those of value, the looked-for information came out—though in unexpected form.

“Well, we're going to lose our friend Ratislaw.”

“Where?” enquired Hallard.

“He's just decided to drop off at Constantinople—had a letter or something calling him back to Vienna on urgent affairs.”

This made action imperative. They were due to drop anchor in the Golden Horn in twenty-four hours. It was disquieting, and yet a spur to action.

At that moment there came a telephone call for the purser, and Wilmer, after listening at the receiver and assenting briefly, turned to lock up his safe.



"Excuse me for a few moments. The Old Man wants me in his cabin about some supplies. Shan't be long if you'll wait and help yourself to baccy."

"Right," answered Hallard from his easy-chair.

The young fellow went out of his cabin briskly, humming a tune.

Behind him he left opportunity.

For in the locked safe he had carelessly left his bunch of keys. In a flash there came to the adventurer a scheme which was pure inspiration. It threw over all the plans he had weaved so carefully, but that mattered nothing. It meant a dangerous risk to himself, but that also mattered little.

Rapidly he unlocked the safe and searched it for Mrs. Eames's necklace. Within a few moments it lay in his hands, glistening, fascinating, luring—but imitation splendour. He tried it against a diamond sleeve link of his own, and the zircon would not scratch diamond. Within another few seconds he had hidden it in a flower glass on Wilmer's desk, locked up the safe again, and returned to his easy-chair and the filling of his pipe.

"You left your keys in the safe," said Hallard when the young purser came back to the cabin. "Lucky I was here."

And now to wait for the explosion. If it did not come before they reached Constantinople, but later, then things would look black for Hallard, on whom suspicion must inevitably rest.

No, better to set a match to the powder himself and time it for the right moment. So Hallard said to his wife: "I want you to ask Mrs. Eames if she is going to wear her necklace for dinner. We are due at Constantinople at ten o'clock to-morrow evening, so ask her about six o'clock. Be sure she gets that necklace from the purser's safe. If necessary, make her suspicious of its safety."

"Why?" asked Renie.

"I'm not going to tell you," he returned bluntly. Renie must know nothing about his new-born plan, in case it were to fail and suspicion of the theft were to fall upon him. At all costs, Renie must have clean hands in the matter.

She looked at her husband searchingly, and the deep sympathy between them gave her an intuitive feeling for his reason for silence. "I want to share the danger," she asked.

"There's no danger," he reassured her. "Remember: six o'clock or a little before. That's vital."

At seven o'clock the next evening, when they entered the narrow strait of the Dardanelles, and the tangle of hills, dotted with grim forts, lay golden and purple to each side of them, the explosion came. Hallard, watching from a deck-chair near to the officers' quarters, saw Wilmer rushing white-faced to the captain's cabin. Presently stewards were called to that cabin one by one. Dressed for dinner, Hallard sat quietly in his deck-chair, waiting for the inevitable summons. The bugler in uniform

came his rounds, proclaiming dinner. And then the looked-for summons came.

"The captain's compliments, sir, and would you step to his cabin for a moment?"

Hallard followed the steward and entered the cabin with easy, confident step. The captain, the chief officer, and the purser were gathered there—the two former grave and critical, the latter white and scared. Captain McIntyre came to his point with the bluntness of the seaman:

"Mrs. Eames's diamond necklace has been stolen from the ship's safe. Mr. Wilmer tells me you were in his cabin late last night. Did you notice anything likely to throw light on the theft?"

Hallard looked over at Wilmer with a friendly smile before answering the captain: "This is no surprise to me."

"Explain yourself, sir."

"If Mr. Wilmer is under any suspicion, I can clear him at once. I rather fancy I can lay hands on that necklace."

Wilmer gulped his relief. The other two men scrutinised Hallard keenly, but there was no wavering of his easy self-possession.

"Well, sir?"

"This is a very delicate matter," returned the adventurer. "I've had a glimpse of the necklace, and I can probably get it back for you. Will that be sufficient, or must you have explanations?"

"It's my duty to know the whole facts," said blunt Captain McIntyre.

"It might mean a very disagreeable scandal. Would that be acceptable to the owners of the *Ariadne*?"

The first officer drew his chief aside and whispered earnestly.

The latter appeared to consent grudgingly, and said to Hallard: "Well, Sir Ralph, I'll waive that point. What do you propose to do?"

"Give me to anchor-drop to get you back your necklace."

"No man leaves the ship until the jewellery is found," answered the captain. "I'll expect your report before anchor-drop."

"Be easy on that score. But have I your authority in case of necessity?"

"You have."

"Then reassure Mrs. Eames, and let's all go to dinner as though nothing unusual were on foot."

Shortly after dinner Hallard went to his cabin and listened at the crack of the door. Presently he seemed to hear some movement he was waiting for, and he went out and rapped briskly at Count Ratislaw's cabin.

"Come in!"

Hallard entered with his usual easy self-possession, and closed the door quietly behind him. "I've come for that necklace," he remarked in ordinary conversational tones.

The Count, in the midst of his packing, stopped abruptly and rose to face his visitor.

"I do not understand you."

"You understand me quite well—Mrs. Eames's diamond necklace."

"You are dreaming!"

"That piece of jewellery is here in your cabin."

"Thees ees your leetle game of bluff, no doubt?" answered the Count with his silky voice.

"Are you prepared, if necessary, to submit your luggage to search?"

"Yes."

That gave Hallard his cue. "Then I'll trouble you to turn out your pockets."

Ratislaw moved to place his fingers on the bell. "I do not weesh to continue thees conversation. You will please go out, or shall I ring for the steward?"

Hallard pointed to the telephone with which every cabin on the *Ariadne* was equipped. "Better ring up the captain, and ask if I have his authority or not."

The Count paused with his finger on the bell. "Thees ees an outrage!" he blustered.

"I want that necklace lying in your pocket, *now*."

"Eet belongs to me."

"Ah!—your story is that it was given to you?"

"By Major Eames."

"On the contrary, you took it from the purser's safe last night."

The Count involuntarily moved a step backwards as though to place more space between himself and Hallard. Into the creamy whiteness of his face had crept a tinge of grey.

"May I take a seat?" asked Hallard, and moving a chair near to the door, dropped into it uninvited.

"You stole eet yourself!" hissed the Count, guessing at a venture.

"If that's your theory, ring up the captain and have him investigate." And then, curtly, with jaw squared: "Drop this pretence! The necklace has been taken. You have it. Who would believe that Major Eames took it from the ship's safe to give it to you?"

"But mine ees the real one! Eet was given me in payment for a debt."

"Then there would be a receipt."

"A debt of honour, I tell you! He lost money to me at piquet."

"Rubbish! On the contrary, you owe him money over piquet."

Exasperated at Hallard's point-blank contradictions, the Count for a moment let his tongue blurt out a word he bitterly regretted the next instant.

"When a man sells the secr——"

In a flash the whole situation lay clear to Hallard—the key was in his hands. For a moment, he let silence do his work for him; then he sprang from his chair and lashed out with the words: "When a man sells the secrets of his country, he must expect blackmail—is that your meaning? You got to



know it in a burst of drunken confidence. You used that knowledge as a club to force the Major to give you his wife's necklace. You still have the letter or paper that incriminates him. You are still playing cat and mouse with him. Well, listen to this: Captain McIntyre lets no man leave this ship until Mrs. Eames's necklace is in my hands. You don't leave this cabin until I have it and the Major's letter as well. Is that plain, or shall I telephone to the bridge and get assistance?

"Drop that!" His left hand flashed out and gripped the Count's right hand as it moved towards his pocket. The two men were separated by inches. "Remember this: We're on British territory on board the *Ariadne*, and Captain McIntyre can——"

A knock came at the door. Hallard released the Count and went to open it. A steward was in the passage.

"I've come for Count Ratislaw's luggage, sir. We shall be in harbour in a quarter of an hour."

"Come back in five minutes," answered Hallard, and closed the door. Then he turned to the Count: "We're slowing down, but we're on British territory until the captain drops anchor. If he likes, he can turn round and make for sea. Have you decided?"

"And eef I give them up?" stammered the Count, chalk-white.

"That is all Captain McIntyre requires."

The Austrian took from his pocket a diamond necklace wrapped in a silk handkerchief and a letter with a Maltese postmark.

"I shall settle thees account with you some day," he hissed.

"I'm agreeable," said Hallard curtly.

A few minutes later he was in the purser's cabin, showing him the necklace.

"Thank heaven!" said Wilmer with heartfelt relief. "You're a wonder! Shall I take it to the Old Man?"

"Better get the Major and Mrs. Eames to identify it first."

Wilmer moved his hand towards the bell.

"No, better keep this as quiet as possible," continued Hallard. "Suppose you tell the captain and then bring them here yourself?"

"Right, old chap, I will. And more thanks than I can express!"

When the purser had left, Hallard took out the zircon imitation from the flower-glass and compared the two side by side. The imitation was a wonderful piece of craftsmanship. Only a trained expert could distinguish between the two at sight. He balanced them in his hands lovingly, and a wave of temptation came upon him.

How easy it would be to keep the real one and return the imitation!

But that wouldn't be quite the game. He had set out to unshackle the Major from the Count's hold over him, and trust to generosity for his ultimate reward. He would hand over both the

necklaces, and the letter with the Maltese postmark, and the Major would surely do the decent thing by him.

Reluctantly Hallard put the two necklaces into his handkerchief pocket, side by side.

Wilmer entered the cabin eagerly with the Eameses at his heels.

"You have Sir Ralph to thank for this," he said. "He's a wonder!"

Hallard first handed the letter with the Maltese postmark to Major Eames.

The latter thrust it into his pocket without a word of thanks, and burst out with drunken savageness: "What are you prying into my affairs for? Didn't I tell you I wanted none of your cursed interference? D—— your meddling!"

Hallard froze into silence at this utterly uncalled-for insult. A bitter retort was on his lips, but he checked it. Instead, he quietly put his hand into the pocket where the two necklaces lay together and drew out *one*.

"This is yours, I think?" he said to Mrs. Eames, and handed it over.

\* \* \* \* \*

Half an hour later, Renie and her husband were on shore and driving through the narrow streets of Constantinople on a brief tour of inspection.

No others of the ship's party were within hearing as she whispered, "What happened?"

"I have a necklace in my pocket," replied her husband.

"A necklace! Which one?"

"I'm hanged if I know. I haven't had an opportunity to test it yet. I drew it from a lucky-bag. It may be the zircon or it may be the diamond. Let's hope it's the real thing."

It was.

## CHAPTER VI.

### ONE WAY WITH BORES.

ON her return sweep of the Mediterranean, the *Ariadne* was scheduled to reach Brindisi in good time to connect with the Brindisi-Calais *train de luxe*, which at that period ran once a week for the benefit of the flocks of English tourists winging homewards from the mock-summer of Egypt and the Levant. A heavy westerly gale delayed the yacht, and she made port in the evening when the express was impatiently steaming for departure and whistling a hurry-up call to the belated arrivals.

Hallard, Renie and Laroche hastened from boat to train, had their luggage registered through to London, snatched up from a bookstall half a dozen magazines and illustrated weeklies, and went to find their reserved seats, booked by cable.

Barely had they settled, Hallard and his wife in a three-berth *coupé*, and Laroche in another coach (since his status to the outside was that of

valet, convention forbade him to occupy the same compartment), than the impatient train pulled out of the station. The third occupant of the *coupé* had left his rug and his travelling impedimenta in the compartment, and was probably outside in the corridor, smoking.

"I hope he's some one pleasant to travel with," said Renie. "We've two nights and days together."

Hallard glanced up at the rack above and noted a couple of labels on the fellow-passenger's suitcase. "Shepherd's Hotel, Cairo," he read out, "and Winter Palace Hotel, Luxor. Let's guess what kind of a man he is."

"English, obviously, by the pattern of the rug. A retired Army man or Indian Civil, I should guess."

"Tanned face and eyes wrinkled by the sun and white moustache; tall, and well set-up; stiffish in manner, but a good sort when he opens out."

"No, red-faced with bulgy eyes; fond of his dinner; fussy, and inclined to be irritable."

"Bet you a sovereign he's nearer my description."

"I take you," smiled Renie.

"Married, bachelor or widower?" pursued Hallard. This guessing game was a favourite of theirs.

"If he's Army, he would have married for the sake of the regiment."

"Well, married or widower?"

Renie studied the appearance of rug and suitcase, and hesitated.



"Bet you another sovereign he's a widower," offered Hallard.

"No, *I'll* take that end of the bet."

"Very well. I'll do the finding out. Perhaps it's some one we know, which will decide the bets at once. I'll get his name from the label. In any case, it's useful to know who the man is."

Hallard rose and moved the suit-case to expose the label or stamped name on the further side.

"Damnation!" he exclaimed.

"Who is it?"

"Sir Gascoyne Belleville."

"Then I won't stay in this *coupé*!" declared Renie emphatically, and started to roll up her rug.

Sir Gascoyne Belleville, Bart. (the name is carefully to be pronounced as Bevel) was the champion of the dignity of the baronetcy in general and the relentless opponent of the revived Kenrick title. Not only a bore, but a highly disagreeable person. To travel with him in the same *coupé* for two nights and days was unthinkable.

"I'll see the conductor at once, dear, and get us moved," answered Hallard, and went to find that official.

When he returned after a prolonged absence, it was with the information that the train was crowded, having been made up to provide berths for a known number of passengers, and that there was only one other sleeping berth available.

"Shall I move your things there?" asked Hallard. "A married couple have the other seats in the *coupé*. They seem a decent sort."

"Surely there are two places for us together in some part of the train?"

"There aren't. And no one will be leaving before Paris."

"A good tip to the conductor——" suggested Renie.

"I tried that. Showed him a gold coin."

"Then *he* must move!" decided Renie, and unrolled her rug once more.

At that moment the object of their colloquy entered the compartment from the corridor, throwing away the butt of his cigar. He was a skeletal little man, with a narrow, high-pitched head, a very aristocratically aquiline nose, scanty hair arranged to the utmost advantage, and a thin, high-pitched voice. Pomposity does not go naturally with that type of figure and voice, yet Sir Gascoyne Belleville, Bart., strove unceasingly to be pompous. He did his best to make up for the ill-equipment of Nature, stretching to his full height (and enlarging the height with "extensors" inside the heels of his boots), and puffing out his meagre chest.

He frowned importantly on recognising Hallard and Renie.

"Mr. Kenrick, is it not?" he enquired, studiously sinking the title of "Sir Ralph." "And Mrs. Kenrick."

Renie gave the coldest of nods, and Hallard drawled an answer: "Sorry we have to inflict ourselves on you for two days."

"They should have told me," muttered Belle-

ville half-aloud—it was a mannerism of his to use the public air for his thinking. “They should most certainly have told me.”

“I believe there’s a vacant berth in the rear coach,” mentioned Hallard.

“I never travel in the rear coach.” It sounded like a question of dignity, but he meant it as a precaution against railway accidents.

“If you wished it, I expect they could make up a couch in the dinin’-car.”

“The dining-car will be uncoupled during the night.”

“Perhaps some one will exchange places with you.”

The conductor appeared at this moment on his round of coupon-clipping. Belleville produced his green-covered book of Cook’s coupons from his breast-pocket and demanded of the conductor: “Find me another berth in the train, but not in the rear coach. Find some one to exchange with me.” The command was in English, as though the baronet considered that all Continental officials should understand English as a matter of course. This one happened to do so.

“I vill enquire, milord.”

Belleville also produced from the pocket of the coupon-book a buff registration form, and demanded: “See that my baggage is not being crushed!”

“I am very sorry, milord, but cannot see baggage. Locked in vagon until Paris.”

The baronet fussed about in his seat, awaiting

the return of the conductor, while Hallard and Renie buried themselves in a couple of illustrated journals. After a long wait, penetrated by frequent mutterings of "Expect me to travel with these people"; "they ought to be turned out"; "disgraceful arrangements!" the official returned with a multitude of polite regrets. The only available berth was in the rear coach.

Belleville settled himself obstinately in his seat, and presently looked up at the hand-luggage in the rack.

"I note that you are still using that unwarranted title," he proclaimed. If he had to travel with them, he proposed to thrash out in full detail the matter of Sir Ralph or not Sir Ralph.

Receiving no answer, Belleville muttered to himself: "Impudent impostors," and then reiterated his former statement.

Renie looked over at her husband, and Hallard made answer: "Neither my wife nor myself wish to discuss the matter."

"But we *shall* discuss it! You take seats in my compartment and flaunt this title in my face. I demand that the question shall be definitely settled, once and for all."

"Dinner must be nearly ready, dear," said Hallard to his wife. "Shall we come to the dinin'-car?"

And they left the compartment. Outside in the corridor, Renie asked: "Is there no way of getting rid of him, *chéri*? I can't stand two nights next door to his mutterings."

"I'll get rid of him somehow if I have to chuck

him off at a station," answered Hallard. "Don't worry, I'll find a way."

He began to think hard, and presently went to see a conductor and borrow a time-table.

After dinner the *coupés* were made up into sleeping-berths, and Renie and her husband retired early, ignoring the baronet's repeated attempts to engage them in a discussion of his pet grievance. At length the baronet himself retired, removing collar and coat and waistcoat and hanging them on the hooks provided by the side of the couch. His snores echoed through the compartment.

Then Hallard, awake and watchful, arose, and with easy deftness searched into the breast-pocket of Belleville's coat. A glance into the coupon-book showed him that the registration number of the luggage was "848." That was all he wanted. Noiselessly replacing the registration slip and the book of coupons, he went to find Laroche and took him out to the corridor for private talk.

Hallard explained the situation, and then added : "I'm awfully sorry, old fellow, to ask you to go to this trouble ; but I want you to get out when the train stops at Foggia at ten-thirty to uncouple the dining-car, and catch the local back to Brindisi."

"*Si Madame le désire, je vais volontiers,*" answered Laroche cheerfully.

"Thanks awfully ! It's the only way I can think of. As soon as you get to Brindisi, have this telegram sent off." He handed over a slip of paper.

Laroche looked it over doubtfully, and asked if

the Italian post office would allow such a telegram to go through.

"Slip the clerk a ten-lire note if he makes trouble," answered Hallard, who knew the ways of Italian petty officials.

And so, at Foggia, Laroche left the express with his handbag and went back to Brindisi.

\* \* \* \* \*

Early the next morning, at Ancona, the *de luxe* stopped to pick up mails. A sub-stationmaster stalked through the corridors holding a telegram envelope and calling out in a loud voice for Sir Gascoyne Belleville. His pronunciation of the name was Italianesque, but it was sufficiently close to reach its mark.

The baronet roused himself from his dozing and took the envelope.

"Most annoying! Scandalous!" he muttered aloud as he glanced over the enclosure.

"Anything the matter?" asked Hallard from behind his curtain.

"Disgraceful arrangements! They wire to say that my baggage, No. 848, was detained at Brindisi for examination. 'Send keys or return personally.'"

"Better send keys," suggested Hallard.

"And have them steal half the contents of my trunks!"

The sub-stationmaster poured out some quick-fire Italian.

"What's that the fellow says?"



Hallard translated: "He asks if there's any answer. The train leaves in two minutes."

Belleville bounded out of his couch and began to hurry on his collar and waistcoat. "I must go back to Brindisi."

"I'll help you!" cried Hallard, and taking up the baronet's suit-case and rug, deposited them joyfully on the Ancona platform.

"Thank heavens!" said Renie, as the train moved out.

"Thank Laroche," answered Hallard.

## CHAPTER VII.

### VERSUS THE BANK OF ENGLAND.

“THE Bank of England would make a highly interesting opponent,” remarked Hallard from the depths of his study arm-chair in their luxurious flat at Queen Anne’s Mansions, Westminster.

Renie laughed good-humouredly at her husband’s supposed pleasantry.

“Here’s an article on a visit to the Bank of England,” pursued Hallard, referring to a popular magazine he was reading. “It appears that the Bank has two little stock jokes which it trots out for every visitor. The stage setting for one of them is the gold vault. You find yourself surrounded by untold millions of wealth in the form of gold ingots weighing about a quarter-ton apiece, and the Bank official remarks jocosely that you’re at perfect liberty to walk off with any amount of gold you please, and nobody will stop you. You try to lift a gold bar, and then the laugh is on you. The

other joke takes place in the bank-note room. They put a million-pound note into your hands and tell you you're now a millionaire. Then they all grin at you for the second time."

"It sounds very feeble."

"It sounds exactly the kind of joke which would be evolved at a board meeting by the Worshipful Governors—proposed, seconded, and duly recorded in the minutes—and then issued for general consumption amongst the staff."

Something in her husband's ironic tone caught at Renie sharply.

"Surely you're not seriously thinking of working the Bank?" she asked with wide-eyed concern.

"I am!"

"Sheer madness! I know you don't think much of bank directors; but this is utterly different. The Bank of England! Why, everyone knows the biggest financial men in London crowd one another for the honour of being on the board. All the richest, solidest, shrewdest——"

"'Shrewdest' is the very loophole," interrupted Hallard. "You know I can't work against the ordinary, simple-minded, straight-thoughted fellow. My style of poker-play only pays when the others at the table are the deep, wise ones. Now, I've got the germ of an idea that looks good on the surface. I propose to pay a visit to the Bank of England, and see if this magazine writer has set out things as they actually are."

"Don't do it, *chéri*!" pleaded Renie.

Hallard pressed her hand.

"I won't if you say no. Let me see how things lie, and then I'll put the scheme up to you to pass on."

"We've done very well the last twelve months. Can't we stand out this deal?"

"That's the very reason for standing in. Luck's with us at present. Always run your lucky streak to the far end."

Like most "gentlemen of fortune," Hallard was permeated with the superstition of luck. If he felt in the innermost depths of his being that it was against him, he would call off from the most fair-seeming *coup*. But let him have the intuition that it was with him, and there were practically no limits to his dare-devilry.

"We've made a clear six thousand over the Eames necklace," pursued Hallard. "I feel very much like putting that up as an ante. Let me see how things lie, dear."

Renie knew that her husband's promise to give her the veto on the final scheme would not be broken. She assented on that proviso.

A few days later, armed with an introduction from his bankers, Sir Ralph Kenrick, *dilettante* young man of fashion, was presenting credentials at the squat stone building in the heart of the City which controls the finance of a world-wide empire and sends out nerve-threads into every bourse in Europe and the Americas. When the Governors of the Bank of England meet to settle the Bank rate, every jobber in Consols stands on his toes like a sprinter in a hundred yards' race waiting for the

starting pistol, every finance house is eagerly ready to scalp a few precious centimes or pfennigs off the international exchanges.

The Bank of England is the nerve-ganglion of international finance.

Hallard had previously made an examination of the exterior. The Bank is practically a citadel inside a square rampart wall—a wall with blank windows and columned supports and floriated balustrades to give a fictitious superficial impression of the sides of a building, but in reality a rampart wall pregnable only to artillery or high explosives. There are four narrow entrances, giving north, south, east, and west on Lothbury, Threadneedle Street, St. Bartholomew Lane, and Princes Street; the rest is solid wall two stories high.

If any gold, notes, or other document spelling money were to be taken out of the Bank of England, it must seemingly pass through one of these four entrances. In the daytime each has, of course, its uniformed watchman; at night-time the four entrances are closed with iron gates, and a squad of soldiers mount guard inside the citadel.

Sir Ralph Kenrick's visit had been arranged by letter a couple of days before, on his bankers' introduction, and he was now presenting credentials at the Threadneedle Street entrance. In outward appearance a young man of foppish affectation, with a monocle and a politely vacuous smile, Sir Ralph made a curious contrast to the old-world beadle who conducted him from department to department. The beadle, in his large Napoleon hat and his gown

of sombre red slashed with black velvet, represented the dignity and solidity of the great institution where he played his humble part ; Sir Ralph represented gilded leisure, ephemeral fancy, idle whim.

The visitor was taken the usual round of the counting-houses, vaults, note depositories, and printing works. He said, "Aw, very interestin'," to mostly everything ; took the million-pound banknote into his hands for the usual few moments ; attempted to raise a quarter-ton gold ingot down in the steel-lined vaults.

But behind the monocle and the vacuous smile Hallard was storing up swiftly and with all his powers of concentration the tiny details that were to serve him in his self-arranged duel with the Bank of England.



## CHAPTER VIII.

### INSIDE THE CITADEL.

WHEN the full scheme was laid before Renie, she reluctantly consented to sanction it and to play her part. But her eyes were clouded with anxiety in spite of her husband's overwhelming optimism.

Some few days were consumed in preparation, including a visit to his own bankers, where he deposited a sealed packet; and then Hallard opened the game by appearing at the head office of a famous travel agency in the guise of an American tourist just landed in London.

You know that London has a popular conventional idea of what the American tourist ought to be. He (the imaginary one) wears a slouch hat, a set of impossible checks, and a goatee beard; his front name is Cyrus K; his back name is Vansomethingorother; he has made his money packing pork and beans in Chicago; he says "I guess" every second sentence; "mighty slick" is his adjective

of eulogy ; "hell " is what he fills in gaps of tea-table conversation with ; his conduct is highly eccentric and explosive ; and he "does " England, Scotland and Wales in their entirety in three days.

Without going to that extreme length, Hallard measured up very fairly to the character of a rich, stout, hustling American tourist, particularly in the matter of "doing the sights."

"I want a courier," he told the agency, "to take me around London, Devonshire, Stratford-on-Avon, Chester, and the Dukeries in four days. I want to see Buckingham Palace, the Empire vaudeville theatre, the Tower of London, Madame Tussaud's, the House of Lords, Nelson's statue, Pierpont Morgan's office, the Bank of England——"

"One moment, sir. We shall have to obtain for you special permission for a visit to the Bank of England."

"Can you get it by lunch-time ? "

The manager looked horrified.

"We can get it in two days' time, sir—not before ! "

"Very well, I'll do England first, and London when I get back. When's the next train to Devonshire ? "

The name Hallard had selected for the American tourist was "Mr. Randall Kingsmith." The initials "R.K." allowed him to use Sir Ralph's Kenrick's marked toilet necessities, and were convenient in many small ways. The courier that went with him

was a weedy little Swiss who had just left off being a schoolmaster.

In the course of their lightning tour round England, the little Swiss became seriously perturbed about his employer's sanity. American tourists were all eccentric, he knew, but this big, stout man was going beyond the limits of eccentricity. He quarrelled violently with a railway guard over an odd threepence for a luncheon basket, and he tipped a five-pound note to a picture-postcard seller at Stratford because he said the man reminded him of poor old King Lear. At Chester, he bought a string of six live Cheshire cats, and at the Dukeries he bought six potted palms—for the purpose, he explained, of giving the cats roosting-places—and a white mouse to keep them company.

However, this Mr. Kingsmith was very generous to his courier, tipping him with odd sums of money at all sorts of unexpected moments. As, for instance, seventeen shillings and threepence on sitting down in Shakespeare's chair at Stratford, and one shilling and sixpence on getting up again; eight shillings on first catching sight of Sheffield's pall of smoke, and one pound six shillings and fourpence on losing an umbrella. When the little Swiss had mentioned to Mr. Kingsmith that he had left his own umbrella in the train at St. Pancras, the stout American had turned up his loose cash and solemnly counted out one pound six shillings and fourpence, "to buy yourself a new one with a bright red handle that won't get lost."

Consequently, the little Swiss made no complaint

of Mr. Kingsmith's eccentricities to the travel agency. Allured by the prospect of still more reasonless tips, he gladly accompanied him round London. If his employer tipped seventeen and threepence for sitting in Shakespeare's chair, what might he not hand over for wiping his boots on the mat of Pierpont Morgan's office, or for standing before a wax statue of "Peter the Painter" at Madame Tussaud's?

At ten o'clock of the morning of the pre-arranged visit to the Bank of England, Mr. Kingsmith sent off a brief and cryptic telegram to Renie at their Westminster flat. It ran to three words only:

"Let her rip."

Then he proceeded to Threadneedle Street, accompanied by the Swiss courier and the white mouse, the latter being in the side pocket of his coat. Mr. Kingsmith, looking stouter than ever, seemed to be curiously sobered by the grave solemnity of the Bank of England. He made no unusual demonstration as they went from department to department, and it was not until they arrived at the gold vaults that he broke away from the conventional with startling suddenness.

There were four of them in the steel-lined vault—Mr. Kingsmith, the courier, an elderly official of the bullion department named Satterley, and a muscular watchman who had seen service in India and in the Soudan, and wore a line of medals on his Bank uniform.

Said Mr. Satterley, with ponderous jocosity, pointing to the ingots lying around:

"This is where we keep all the spare gold we don't want. Our scrap-heap, so to speak. We allow our visitors to take away as much of the gold as they can carry, without hindrance. Would you care, sir, to take away a bar or two as a little memento of your visit?"

"I would," answered Mr. Kingsmith.

"Pray help yourself," continued Mr. Satterley, his eyes wrinkling to the coming fun of seeing another foolish visitor trying to carry away a quarter-ton ingot.

"I will," answered Mr. Kingsmith.

Then things happened quickly. Before the others could realise what was being done, the visitor had struck a match and was applying it to a thin, amber-coloured stick of material he had taken from out his waistcoat pocket.

"Cordite, by God!" cried the soldier-watchman.

"I'm packed tight with cordite, dynamite, and lyddite!" snapped Hallard. "Coat, waistcoat, trousers and hat! That's how I'm going to lift the gold!"

The little Swiss courier uttered a piercing shriek and fled wildly to the upper regions. Striking out blindly at the clerks who tried to stop him, he rushed into the courtyard and out towards the Lothbury gate of the citadel. Here he was neatly tripped up by a gateman.

"Let me go!" shrieked the Swiss. "He will blow us all sky-high. Let me go, for the love of heaven!"

The gateman hauled him by the scruff of the neck back to the bullion department.

Down below, Mr. Satterley had shrunk back, white-faced, to the open door ; but the watchman, with a pluck that deserved big reward, advanced to seize this dynamite-loaded madman.

"Keep away!" shouted Hallard fiercely.

He had taken out a dynamite blasting-cartridge from a coat pocket and was holding it near to the sizzling cordite in his other hand.

The watchman whipped out a revolver and brought it to the ready, but Hallard's words slashed down through his resolve :

"I tell you I'm packed tight with high explosives. If you fire into me, you kill every man in this building!"

The old soldier knew well that naked cordite burns harmlessly, but packed cordite or dynamite was a very different matter. As he hesitated and looked towards his superior at the doorway, Mr. Satterley beckoned to him wildly. With a jump of understanding he made for the door and shut it to.

Hallard was alone in the steel-lined vault with millions of virgin gold. The lights clicked out. He was left in utter darkness.

By the light of a match he saw that the time was eleven-ten.

\* \* \* \* \*

In a far corner of the citadel, an anxious conference was taking place in the private room of the Deputy-Governor of the Bank, Lord Lemington.



Mr. Satterley, the soldier-watchman and the quivering little Swiss courier were arranged before the desk of the grave-eyed, impassive man who had made a fortune in Lombard Street, and had bought himself a title and wide estates.

"What are we to do, sir?" Mr. Satterley was asking, white-faced and helpless.

"Get the clerks quietly out of the bullion department. No fuss. Put them at work elsewhere," answered the man at the desk almost without moving a muscle.

"That I have already done, sir."

"He is mad—he is mad!" interrupted the trembling courier. "He buy six Cheshire cats at Chester. He buy six palms because he say for them to roost in! He give a fiver to a man who sell him a picture-postcard because he say he is like poor ol' King Lear! He shake hands with Peter the Painter, and say, 'Proud to meet you, sir!' He tell me——"

The voice trailed away into nothingness as the cold, grey eye of the Deputy-Governor pierced into him.

"Lock up this fellow in safe custody," ordered Lord Lemington. "Let him speak to no one until the affair is cleared up. Gag him for safety."

The watchman carried him out struggling and trying to shout through the muffle of a gag.

"What else, sir?" murmured the unfortunate Mr. Satterley, all the jocoseness of the bank-vault scene utterly squeezed out of him.

"If anything happens," answered Lord Lemington significantly, "your resignation will be looked for immediately."

"But you don't think anything *will* happen, surely? If he sets light to the dynamite he will blow himself to fragments as well as the vault. Surely he ought to see that! If only somebody could point out to him how illogical——"

His voice died away under the cold, grey eye of the Deputy-Governor, and there was silence until the watchman returned.

"Sergeant," said Lord Lemington, "has the man enough dynamite on him to wreck the vault?"

"I can't possibly say for certain, sir. He said he was packed tight with explosives. I saw cordite and blasting dynamite myself."

"In any case, even if the vaults are not wrecked, the explosion will be heard outside the walls?"

"Not a doubt of it, sir!"

"Then deliver this note I am writing to the Medical Officer of Health at the Guildhall. We must take strong measures at once."

When the watchman and Mr. Satterley had left the room, both stringently impressed with the necessity of keeping the affair secret from the outside world, Lord Lemington turned grimly to the telephone on his desk, calling for a City number.

\* \* \* \* \*

Inside the vault it was as silent as the grave. The roar of the City traffic was replaced by oppressive stillness. The ticking of his watch sounded loud in Hallard's ears.

He had quickly satisfied himself that escape from the prison vault was humanly possible only in two ways. One was to have the ponderous steel door opened to him from the outside ; the other was to blow down the door with high explosives.

But, curiously enough, he was not anxious to escape. He was content to sit still and let time work on his side. Having satisfied himself that there was no entrance into the vault beyond the door, he camped in a strategic position near the entrance, and proceeded to unearth from inside his waistcoat an electric torch, a compressed lunch, and a roulette watch—that is, a watch where the face is in imitation of a roulette-board and the hand is whizzed around by the touching of a spring.

After a leisured lunch, he amused himself with a game of roulette against the Bank of England as an imaginary opponent—the Bank being supposed to have a spare million pounds to gamble away. Tiring of that after an hour or so, he took out his white mouse and let it run about the floor of the vault. The game was to click out the electric torch and try to find the mouse in the dark—a game for sharp ears.

It was while listening to the patter of the mouse's feet that Hallard suddenly awoke to the realisation of what was being done on the outside of the vault. For some time he had been breathing with certain difficulty, and now there came to him a faint "sss-sss," which sent him flying to the lock of the door.

They were trying to suck the air out of the vault !

This would at one and the same time render himself unconscious, and any explosives harmless.

With his face close against the door by the complex mechanism of the lock he could feel the suction distinctly. At once he started to plug up the lock with the tip of his silk handkerchief and moistened breadcrumbs.

If he had not heard the faint sound of the air sucking through the lock——!

\* \* \* \* \*

The Medical Officer of Health and Mr. Satterley stood before Lord Lemington in the latter's private room at the far corner of the citadel. The Health Officer had not been told that there was a dynamite-loaded madman inside the vault, but merely a madman, else he might not have so willingly risked his life working the suction-pump at the vault door.

Said Mr. Satterley :

“ I am afraid, sir, that he's plugged up the lock mechanism. We can't get any more air out.”

“ Then can you get any in ? ” asked Lord Lemington of the doctor.

“ I don't see the point of that question.”

“ I want him asphyxiated,” replied the Deputy-Governor in much the same tone as he would ask for a penny stamp.

“ Poison him ! ” protested the doctor. “ I can take no part in that ! ”

“ No, not poison,” answered Lord Lemington diplomatically. “ Some gas which will incapacitate him temporarily.”

"Carbonic oxide?"

"I leave that to you."

"Where can we pass it in? The lock mechanism is stopped up."

"There is a secret spy-hole to the vault from above." Mr. Satterley looked startled. "No, Mr. Satterley, it is not known to anyone but the directors. On this one occasion only we will make use of it."

When the Health Officer had left to obtain the apparatus necessary for his task, the bank official asked a question of his chief:

"This ought to bring him to reason, sir, don't you think?"

Lord Lemington answered evenly:

"We will kill him first, and reason with him afterwards."

\* \* \* \* \*

Time dragged leaden-footed inside the vault. The first shadow of doubt began to creep into Hallard's mind as to the wisdom of his reckless scheme. It was now past seven o'clock, and he had reckoned that long before then they would have opened the vault door to parley with him or entice him out on some pretext.

Were they going to leave him inside all night?

Were they going to leave him inside until gradually his breathing would exhaust the vital part of the air and slowly suffocate him?

He ought to have foreseen that move and arranged with Renie accordingly. As it was, his plans had overlooked that terrible possibility.

For a long time past the air had seemed curiously stale and hard to breathe—not in the fashion of the previous attempt on the vault, but in some new and strange manner which he could not account for. Was this the gradual using up of the vital air?

The sudden thought came to him: How is it affecting the white mouse? He clicked on the electric torch and searched around for the little fellow.

Hallard found it—lying on its back, dead.

With a chill of horror he realised the truth—that poisonous gas was being passed into the closed vault to kill him. And with the realisation came resolve to action.

He must blow down the steel door of the vault.

There was no dynamite or lyddite on him, as he had bluffed Mr. Satterley and the others into believing, but only a few sticks of cordite. Naked cordite is harmless enough, but inside a rigid covering its explosive power is, of course, immense.

Into the mechanism of the lock Hallard plugged all his available cordite. Whether it was too much or too little for his purpose he had no means of judging. Whether it would shatter himself as well as the lock of the door was a matter of pure conjecture. The only certain point was that he could have no more than one attempt to force the lock, and with the gambler's instinct he played his cordite to the limit.

Breaking open the electric torch, he used the internals of it to form a fuse connection to the cordite. Then, backed into a far corner of the



vault, he clenched his teeth as he waited for the explosion to take place.

\* \* \* \* \*

After the explosion they found Hallard, stunned and bleeding from head wounds, minus his wig and facial disguise. They stripped him of his outer clothes with gingerly care, but no dynamite was to be found on him. Then, greatly wondering, Mr. Satterley had him carried before the Deputy-Governor in his private room.

“Leave him here with me,” said Lord Lemington.

They withdrew.

When Hallard came to, he found himself lying on a couch facing an impassive man with a cold, grey eye.

“So this is an attempt to rob the Bank of England?”

Hallard gathered his situation. He rose slowly to a sitting posture, and it was with the languid drawl of Sir Ralph Kenrick, *dilettante* young man of fashion, that he replied: “Have you seen my eyeglass, old man?”

“This is no time for jesting,” replied Lord Lemington sternly.

Hallard stared at him, and then began to chuckle to himself as though his amusement could not be kept under control.

“Don’t you see the joke now?” he asked. “It was *all spoof*, you know—a little friendly bet with a fellow at the club. You remember the Mayor of Cambridge and the fellow who got himself up as

the King of Abyssinia and had a regal time of it? Same sort of thing. Really, you don't mean to say you take my spoof seriously?"

Lord Lemington's cold, grey eye still stared at him, but Hallard reeled off his part like an actor born.

"Come, sir, don't look so serious about it! I admit the joke's on me now." He touched his battered face ruefully. "But if you want to have me arrested, do so. Who d'you think would look the silly ass in the mornin' papers—me or the Bank of England?"

Lord Lemington flinched involuntarily. Hallard had touched his one weak spot—fear of public ridicule.

"A likely story about the bet!" was his sharp comment.

Hallard saw that his shaft had gone home, and there was a more deferential seriousness in his voice as he continued:

"I left a sealed packet with my bankers—Edwardes, Coldred and Co. You can see it in the mornin'. It explains the whole spoof. Of course, you'll have me searched before I go, to make sure I'm not cartin' away any gold, and then we'll shake hands and cry quits. I pay the damages. Eh, what?"

"You mean that this matter will be kept secret?"

"As long as you're on the Board of the Bank, sir, I'll say nothin'. Of course, it's a good joke to keep to oneself, don't you know; but I'll promise you that."

"Young man," said Lord Lemington with the first trace of a smile he had shown, "you will end your career either in the Cabinet or in prison."

\* \* \* \* \*

After a thorough search of his clothes and person, and payment in full for the damage he had done to the wall of the vault, they let Hallard go free the next morning. Apparently he had gained nothing by his reckless adventure—rather, lost money by it.

Yet, on the contrary, he and Renie cleared over twelve thousand pounds.

When she received the cryptic telegram to "let her rip," Renie had at once sold short four hundred pounds of Consols on the London Stock Exchange at a one-point margin, two hundred thousand pounds on the Paris Bourse at a half-point margin, and two hundred thousand pounds on the Berlin Bourse at a half-point margin.

Hallard had rightly gauged a banker's first thought in case of crisis—which is to shift the loss on to somebody else's shoulders. Confronted by the sudden crisis of a dynamite-loaded madman in the gold vaults of his bank, Lord Lemington had promptly telephoned to his brokers and thrown Bank of England stock and Consols on to the market.

In the course of the morning the Bank of England's mysterious sales drove Consols from  $90\frac{1}{2}$  to  $89\frac{3}{4}$ , and when it was reported that Paris and Berlin were also selling, a war rumour set in, and the highly sensitive stock fell to  $89\frac{1}{8}$ . Renie closed her sales

in the afternoon, and bought for the rise. The next day, after brokerage charges and other incidentals were subtracted, a clear twelve thousand six hundred pounds lay to her credit.

There are four entrances to the Bank of England, and any gold that leaves the place must go through one of them—apparently. But in this case the gold went out by a telephone wire, and it was Lord Lemington himself who ordered it out.

## CHAPTER IX.

### A WOMAN'S TEARS.

WHEN, in the early nineteen hundreds, Hallard planned to annex the Ascot Gold Cup, he mentally starred one feature of the scheme that seemed audaciously simple and effective.

The famous cup in his possession, he had no intention of running off with it himself, or despatching it by motor-car in the trust of an accomplice. No, he would simply bury it in the grounds of "Wellwood," Lord Craythorpe's house adjoining the racecourse, and leave it there for a year or so until the hue and cry had completely died away. Then he could unearth it in peace and quietness, and take it away to be melted down into a saleable commodity.

Many months before he had cultivated Craythorpe's acquaintance with this end in view, and now he and Renie were guests at the Ascot Week house-party at "Wellwood." They were still in the "Sir Ralph Kenrick" and "Lady Kenrick" stage of their career, since the episode here to be

set out was prior to that memorable fiasco at Rovecq which definitely wiped "Sir Ralph" out of practical use as an *alias*. On that unlucky day all the carefully built-up fabric of personality had to be thrown on the scrap-heap. . . . But in this I am anticipating. At the time of the Ascot Week of 1905, Sir Ralph Kenrick, *dilettante* young man of leisure, had a definite place in English society.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hallard was working his way softly through the heavily-wooded grounds of "Wellwood" late at night. He was seeking a likely place for his *cache*. His feet were rubber-shod; in his hand was an ingeniously contrived telescopic spade which could easily be hidden under one's coat.

As he stepped cat-like between the great boles of the beeches and oaks, eyes alert for the exactly right place in which to make a burying-place for the Gold Cup, a sound of whispering near at hand drew him up sharply.

He crouched in the shadow of a giant oak and strained his ears to listen. Had some one got wind of his plans? Were they waiting to surprise him?

But the first words that came to him with clearness drove that thought completely away. It was a woman's voice—a voice with tears in it—and it said:

"Give it me back. *Please* give it me back! Surely you must see what it means to me?"

"My dear girl, I tell you I can't manage it at present," came the reply in a man's voice, harsh with annoyance.

Hallard knew the man at once by the voice. It was Lambert—Claude Lambert, the famous cricketer—one of the house-party, and a man that Hallard loathed and abominated from the depths of his being. For the matter of that there were few men at "Wellwood" who could do more than tolerate the fellow. Women everywhere went crazy over Claude Lambert, with his Apollo-like handsomeness, his brilliant record as a cricketer, and his carefully-studied insolence of manner. Men everywhere ached to kick him.

But he was a natural cricket genius—had been so as a boy when he gained his school colours at the exceptionally early age of fifteen; carried his skill into the Oxford eleven in his freshman year; and now played for his county ostensibly as an amateur, but in reality as a paid player. The magic name of "cricketer" smoothed the path for him everywhere in English society. It gave him the right to ride roughshod over the feelings of other men not gifted with his peculiar skill.

Old Lord Craythorpe, well-meaning but strangely short-sighted, had invited Lambert to captain his house-party team in the annual match against a neighbouring house-party. Hypnotised by the magic name of "cricketer," Craythorpe saw his guest as a splendid acquisition, and mentally plumed himself on having persuaded the famous Claude Lambert to honour "Wellwood" with his presence for Ascot Week.

Hallard had no compunction in listening further to the very private conversation on which he had



unwittingly intruded. The words he had just overheard were a cross-section into a woman's soul—a woman who needed help. Though he was admittedly a crook, there ran as a thread in the nature of John Hallard a quixotism which now fired him with a sudden resolve to hear further. To hear so that he might help, if perchance his help were possible. For the moment the tears in the woman's voice had driven the Ascot Gold Cup completely out of his thoughts. He quickly took out of an inner pocket a microphone, which he usually carried with him as a professional help, and adjusted it to his ear.

With the microphone in position, the whispered conversation behind the neighbouring oak came quite clearly to him :

“To-night my husband asked me again why I am not wearing it.”

“You can make some excuse or other.”

“I've been making excuses for a week or more. To-night I had to say that the pendant was at a jeweller's in town, being repaired. I had to say it was promised for Wednesday.”

“Why on earth did you say that ? ”

“Claude, you must give it me back. You must ! My husband suspects something. He looked at me so strangely to-night, as if he were boring into my thoughts.”

“You ought to be a match for an old clod like that. Where's your woman's wit ? ”

In answer to that cowardly taunt, there came a flash into the voice of the woman :

"When I lent you the pendant it was to clear you of your debts. You told me that in a month or so you would be straight again and let me have it back. I believed you. I believed you because I loved you. I lent you the pendant willingly and freely. Claude, it's a debt of honour!"

There was a rustling of paper, as though the man were drawing a document out of his pocket, and Lambert replied:

"Look here! 'Lent to Thomas Smith one thousand pounds, on the security of black pearl pendant bordered with ten diamonds. Interest so-and-so.' Your pendant's safe enough. As soon as I can scrape the money together, I'll get it back for you. But just now the thing's a sheer impossibility. I haven't got the money. I can't get the money this week unless I make it at cards or racing or billiards. Wait till next week, and then we'll see."

"I *must* have it to wear on Wednesday night! Claude, Claude, won't you try to realise what this means for me? If by Wednesday the pendant isn't back, my husband will write to the jeweller I said was repairing it, and then——"

"Tell him you've pawned it to pay your bridge debts, or your milliner's bill, or something. Stall him off for a week."

"I can't do it. He would dig into every lie I invented. I can't do it. Please, *please* give it me back!"

"Now, look here, Nita——"

Nita! That would be Mrs. Dennison. Little

Nita Dennison, who had stood by Renie when the D'Arcy Colville crowd had tried to cold-shoulder her two years ago. That was a debt to repay, thought Hallard—a double reason why he should intervene.

But what could be done? At all costs Mr. Dennison, a coarse-bred, sullen, jealous husband, must be kept in ignorance, and that precluded any open intervention. Publicity could not hurt Lambert a hundredth part of the hurt it could bring to Nita Dennison. Every woman would have excuses for the handsome, dashing cricketer, but none for Nita Dennison.

Thinking with tense concentration, Hallard lost the remainder of the whispered conversation. Lambert came from behind the tree and strode away through the darkness, slashing with his cane at the undergrowth.

And presently there came the sound of a woman's sobbing.

Hallard crept away. Completely gone were the thoughts of the Ascot Gold Cup. His whole faculties of mind had switched over to the problem of how he could recover that black pearl pendant for Mrs. Dennison by Wednesday evening. To-night was Monday; that gave two days for action.

First, he had to find where the pendant was in custody. Probably with some West End jeweller acting as an aristocratic pawnbroker. In any case the jewel would only be given up against delivery of the receipt from which Lambert had read out,

and that made it imperative to get possession of the receipt.

To approach Mrs. Dennison was obviously out of the question. To approach Lambert directly would merely precipitate an open scandal. Hallard knew the man through and through. The interview he had just overheard had brought the fellow's inner baseness to light.

A plan, simple and clean-cut, flashed upon him. He would get into Lambert's room while the latter was asleep, find the receipt, redeem the pledge with his own money, and then trust to "holding up" Lambert for a repayment.

In the dead of night, Hallard crept along the corridors to the cricketer's bedroom, and gently turned the handle. The door remained fast! For some obscure reason, Lambert had locked it from the inside.

Hallard went straight back to his room for a set of skeleton keys. He was going to take a risk that in all his career he had never ventured before—to burgle the room of a fellow-guest at a house-party. In view of the risk of detection, it was madness.

But, fired by his quixotic purpose, Hallard cared nothing for possible consequences. He crept back to the cricketer's room, picked the locked door, entered softly, and began to run systematically through the pockets of the sleeping man.

Only to find nothing.

For some reason of his own, Lambert had locked the receipt away in a safe place.

The sleeping man muttered in his sleep, sat up in bed, rose, and switched on the light. Hallard had quickly slipped underneath the bed, and, hidden by the valance, remained there, holding his breath.

It was a moment tense with anxiety, but it passed without detection. Claude Lambert had risen to read through some love-letters with a satisfied smirk. Presently he returned to bed and again went to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the Tuesday morning the cricket match started. The young Apollo attitudinised full in the limelight—a very perfect figure of sleek muscle and pantherly sinew in his silk cricketing shirt, thrown wide open at the neck. Half the women around the lawns were in love with him.

Winning the toss, he put himself in to bat first wicket down, knocked up a hundred in brilliant gallery style, and declared the innings closed as soon as he had made his century, regardless of the wishes of the tail-end men, who would have liked their “knock” as well.

The cricket match was arranged for the mornings only of the Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday; in the afternoon it was naturally the racing that took the house-party’s attention.

Evening found the hero in an admiring buzz of women; but later, when most of the feminine half of the house-party had retired, Hallard contrived to get a game of baccarat started. He had a plan in mind of an entirely different nature from the

scheme of the night before. The cricketer had won a hundred pounds or so at the races that afternoon, and Hallard wanted him at a baccarat table.

He wanted Lambert to win. *He was going to help him to win.* Even if it had to be partly at his own expense, he was going to carry out *that* quixotic plan. The Gold Cup was completely out of his thoughts ; all his energies were bent on his self-imposed task of rescue for Nita Dennison without her knowing it.

Consequently he went up to Lambert in friendly fashion and began chaffing him about his luck.

"To hit up a century in the mornin', spot a couple of ten-to-one winners in the afternoon, and then have all the women at your feet in the evenin'—it's too deuced lucky to last," drawled Hallard. "Don't you get pulled into this baccarat. Come along to the billiard-room and play me a couple of hundred up."

"What for?" asked Lambert.

"A sov. on the game, if you like."

"Thanks ; I don't play for marbles. I like a sporting interest in my game," retorted Lambert with carefully-studied insolence.

"For that matter, so do I. But I don't mind bettin' you won't make anything much over baccarat to-night. A man's luck is like a motor-tyre—run it too long, and it goes bust with a bang."

"What's your bet?"

"Six to one in fivers you don't clear five hundred over the cards."

"Done!"



"Mind you, I'm free to plank against you, at the bank or puntin'," cautioned Hallard.

Claude Lambert looked him over superciliously, and nodded a careless assent. He had no great estimate of the intellect or judgment of this *dilettante* idler.

Now baccarat is by no means the game of pure chance it looks to the outsider at first impression. Two cards are dealt to the right-hand *tableau*, two cards to the left-hand *tableau*, and two to the banker. Whichever hand totals in pips nearest to nine wins (the court cards counting as zero). But each *tableau* can call if desired for an extra card, and then the banker has choice of call. On the judgment of that call, on the reading of men's faces and gestures, fortunes have been made—and lost.

Presently Hallard bought a bank at one of the tables, and Lambert seated himself to punt against him, together with a dozen other men. Under his pose of *dilletante* carelessness, the adventurer was in reality playing with all the concentration of wit to which he had trained himself. Gold and notes were pouring in upon him from the dozen punters at the table.

Lambert, looking thunderous, was doubling and redoubling stakes against the bank, and then the moment arrived for which Hallard had been so carefully waiting.

"Haven't I nearly wiped you out, old man?" he drawled in Lambert's direction, with a smile that challenged to action. "You know I warned you to keep away from the cards."



With the whole table smiling in sympathy with the challenge, the cricketer-hero was stung to decisive action.

"Complement!" he called out loudly.

That meant that he staked on one deal of the cards an amount equal to the pile now lying by the banker.

Hallard was perfectly certain that his opponent had not that sum in his possession in cash, but he said nothing. The whole table watched in silence while the banker dealt out two cards to Lambert and two to himself.

For a full ten seconds Lambert hesitated whether to call or not for the extra card. Hallard judged that he must hold a five or six. Himself he held a "natural" nine—unbeatable.

"I stand on this," called the punter.

Hallard had only to stand pat also, and the hand was won. Instead, he deliberately drew a third card, spoiling his hand completely.

"Mine's a five!" cried Lambert, showing his cards.

Hallard threw his own hand into the discard, and smilingly pushed over to the punter a pile of notes and gold totalling to close on three hundred pounds. The whole table murmured sympathy.

But Hallard said gaily, in the set form of the baccarat table, "*Messieurs, il y a une suite,*" and rose to give up the banker's place to some one else.

"Bluffed you into taking the third card!" sneered the cricketer, counting up his winnings greedily.

“ You’re too hot stuff, old man,” was the smiling reply.

Lambert bought the next bank, had a big run of luck, and rose from the table finally a winner of close on eight hundred pounds. To that he added a thirty from Hallard in settlement of their bet.

“ Now he’ll surely be able to redeem the pendant,” thought Hallard, well pleased with his night’s work.

## CHAPTER X.

### A CASE FOR THE BIG STICK.

WEDNESDAY morning saw the hero again in full limelight. He put himself on to bowl at the best end, with the sun behind him, and made a slaughter amongst the batsmen of the other team.

As the morning wore on, Hallard kept a close but unobtrusive watch on Nita Dennison. He found her white-faced at breakfast time, but by one o'clock there were drawn lines of anxiety about her eyes and mouth, and her hands were twitching as though beyond her control.

The situation lay so plain that spoken words could not have made it plainer. The cur had not passed word to her that he now had the money to redeem the pendant.

In brief, he intended to stick to his money, or perhaps to pay off other debts with it.

It was then that Hallard realised that here was

a case for the big stick—for prompt, ruthless, smashing action. He left the cricket-ground, made his way to Lambert's bedroom, careless of being observed, and forced open a locked valise. In it he found a cash-box; in the cash-box the receipt for the pledged pendant and nearly eleven hundred pounds in cash.

He took the receipt and exactly one thousand pounds, and borrowed a car of Lord Craythorpe's for the ride to London.

In a discreet little back-room of an opulent jeweller's in the West End, the document and the money were exchanged for the black pearl pendant. To the jeweller it was a matter of complete indifference who took away the jewel, provided that he held the legal receipt to absolve him of all responsibility.

The matter, so far, had progressed with uncanny smoothness. By four o'clock Hallard had cleared the outermost suburbs of London, and was joyfully opening up the throttle of the borrowed car on the straight level stretch of country road between Brentford and Staines. The car purred under the touch of the levers like a giant cat, and sprang forward as though released from a cage. Within half an hour the car should be back at "Wellwood."

Out from behind a hedge sprang a policeman with uplifted palm.

For a moment Hallard was tempted to ride on regardless. But sober judgment prevailed. He jammed on the brakes and pulled up.

"Thirty-four miles an hour, sir," said the constable, holding out a fat watch as evidence.

"That's all right, constable. I won't dispute your word. Here's my card. Let me know what the damage is, and I'll pay straight away."

"Can't do that, sir. Case must go before the bench in the usual way."

"Very well. Write me what I've got to pay."

"Certainly, sir. Now will you please let me have a look at your licence, as a matter of form?"

Hallard had no licence. He silently cursed himself for not having brought a licensed chauffeur with him to drive the car. Tentatively he took out a sovereign from his pocket, and balanced it in his hand.

But the constable was not to be bribed. No doubt he had his eye on the promotion ladder. He frowned at the gold coin, and asked again for the licence to be shown to him.

"Frankly, I haven't it with me," said Hallard. "In too much of a hurry when I left home."

"Then you can't drive this car any further."

"But it's a matter of life and death for a woman!"

"It's a matter of the King's regulations," retorted the constable with dignity.

What with a forced visit to the police-station, and the finding of a chauffeur, it was well after six o'clock before Hallard drove in at the gates of "Wellwood" and round to the garage.

As he alighted from the car, Claude Lambert came rapidly forward.

"Kenrick, I want a word with you!" he snapped.

"With pleasure, old man," drawled Hallard.  
"What's up?"

"You'll soon hear what's up. For your own sake we won't discuss it in front of the servants. Come along with me."

There was an empty stable near at hand. The cricketer caught hold of Hallard's arm and drew him inside. Then he shut the door, bolted it, and snarled:

"When I went to my cash-box to get out some money for paying a racing debt, I found a thousand pounds missing. One of the maids told me, when I asked her, that she had seen you going into my room just before lunch. Is that so or not?"

"Of course it's so," drawled Hallard coolly.

"What for?"

"For the thousand pounds. What else?"

"You infernal thief!"

"Not at all, old man. I was merely carryin' out for you a little promise that slipped your memory."

"What d'you mean?"

"This." Hallard drew out a small brown-paper-covered packet from his pocket, and read out an address written on it in ink:

"Mrs. Dennison, 'Wellwood,' Ascot. By hand."

"Give it to me!" ordered Lambert in a tone he would use to a groom.

At that, the "Sir Ralph Kenrick" manner dropped

from off Hallard like a discarded garment, and the steel of his will snapped into his voice :

"Give it to you? No, not now. I gave it to you last night, thinking you had some spark of decent feeling in you. I don't give it again."

"Last night?"

"At the baccarat table. That time you played 'complement' I had a natural against your six. I drew a third card so as to let you win close on three hundred pounds. I helped you after that to win at least another two hundred. I put the money into your hands so that you could keep your promise to Mrs. Dennison. To-day I got your measure down to a fraction, and I decided to keep your promise for you. Here's the black pearl pendant. I intend to give it to Mrs. Dennison myself, so as to cut out any further reliance on your memory."

"I'll have you arrested for theft."

"You'll do nothing of the kind."

"Why not?"

"You'll not leave this stable until the matter is settled between us as man to man. Here's the pendant"—Hallard placed his packet in a manger behind him—"now we'll fight for it."

"I don't care to fight. I've got to keep my hands right for the match to-morrow," growled Lambert sullenly.

"You're a cricketer—no one doubts that. Now try and be a sportsman as well—if it's in you, which I doubt. Fight for the pendant!"

"I won't fight, I tell you."



"Then if *you* won't, I will," said Hallard, and drove his fist full on to the other's chest.

Lambert picked himself up from the floor, and threw off his coat and waistcoat, collar, and tie. Hallard followed suit.

To outward appearance, the odds lay all with the cricketer, tall and splendidly modelled, and with his shoulder, arm, chest, and flank muscles kept in thorough order by his almost daily work on the cricket-field. Hallard was slack in muscle with the life of ease he had to keep up in the character of "Sir Ralph Kenrick."

But muscle does not alone win a fight. The nerve and muscle behind the will count big.

Lambert led off warily. The sudden change of his opponent from the character of a *dilettante* to the character of a man of purpose had startled him. He aimed to get the other's measure as a boxer.

But Hallard had no intention of having this merely a sparring match. He knew that he would be winded long before the athlete. He had to hit hard and hit soon.

Without regard for defence, he rained attack on the tall, muscular frame of the cricketer.

Claude Lambert covered and dodged and feinted. In a far corner of the stable his eye had caught a runnel slippery with water, and craftily he drew his adversary towards the treacherous foothold.

A too vigorous punch on the part of Hallard caught by an armguard, a side jab in return, and

Hallard had slipped on the moisture of the runnel and fallen heavily.

As he lay on the ground, stunned for the moment, the cricketer, with a snarl of triumph, lifted his boot and kicked him full in the ribs.

Hallard gasped and twisted in agony.

"So now you've got what you were asking for!" sneered Lambert. He turned on his heel and went to get possession of the pendant.

But he reckoned without the nerve and will behind the muscle. Hallard watched him while trying to get back breath and strength . . . watched him take up the brown-paper-covered packet . . . watched him to the door of the stable . . . watched him unbolt it.

And at that last moment the nerve and will came into action like the reserves of an army repulsed at the first attack. He sprang up, cleared the width of the stable in a streak of time, and smashed on to Lambert a blow from the shoulder that sent him staggering to the floor.

As the cricketer came up from his knees and his hands left the ground, a second punch full in the face felled him again.

Four times he went down before he lay still. The muscular frame of the athlete shivered in the stillness as though he were in an ague.

The shivering was not from cold. His nerve was gone.

Panting to regain his breath, Hallard watched him for a full half-minute. Then he asked quietly :

"Who takes the pendant?"

"Take it, blast you!" whimpered the cricketer-hero, dabbing with the sleeve of his shirt at his mouth, where two front teeth were hanging loose. "I suppose Nita egged you on to this, the little——"

Hallard slammed the door on that coward's epithet.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the foot of the broad oaken staircase that leads down to the hall of "Wellwood," Nita Dennison was waiting amongst the others for the sounding of the dinner-gong.

There were drawn lines of pain in her face while she strove to chat brightly about the doings of the day.

A heavy footstep sounded on the staircase above, and the big, coarse-jowled figure of her husband came into sight. He descended slowly, his eye fixed coldly on his wife—on her neck where the black pearl pendant ought to be hanging.

Mr. Dennison came down and made his way towards her with a set question on his lips.

But before he could draw her aside, a young fellow with one eye almost closed up intervened.

"This is for you, Mrs. Dennison, isn't it?" drawled the voice of Sir Ralph Kenrick. He held a brown-paper-covered packet in his hand. "Beastly careless of the servants to leave it lyin' about.

Found it out by the lawns. 'Scuse me—got to buck up and change."

He went off to the upper corridors without waiting for thanks. Upstairs he found Renie waiting in his room, and she naturally wanted to know the meaning of the swollen and discoloured eye. He explained in full as he changed into his evening clothes.

"So now our debt to Nita Dennison is cancelled," he concluded cheerfully.

Renie did not take the story in the spirit he expected. In fact, she took it decidedly coldly.

"And so you've wasted three days, lost a couple of hundred pounds, and lost the chance of the Gold Cup for—for practically nothing," was her chilly comment.

Hallard was astounded at this attitude on the part of Renie. It did not strike him at the moment that it arose from a very natural jealousy and not from cold-heartedness.

But the dinner-gong rang, and further discussion had to be postponed.

Late that night Renie took up the matter again. "I've had a private chat with Nita," said she. "I wanted her to know exactly what the episode cost you in cash and brains. I wanted her to realise her obligations. You forget her husband's on the board of several Westralian companies."

"Hold on a moment. That one gets past me. What's the connection?"

"Of course I asked her for some inside tips when next there's anything going to happen in Westralian

mines," answered Renie calmly. "We can't expect to live merely on thanks from damsels in distress."

Hallard nodded assent.

"You're right. Shake me and wake me up! I certainly ought to work Dennison for a good healthy touch. Let's dig out a scheme!"

## CHAPTER XI.

FOR DENNISON'S BENEFIT.

A WEEK later, back in their flat at Queen Anne's Mansions, Hallard was deep in one of those brown studies which formed, as it were, the crucible for his schemes.

He was playing absently with his pocket roulette watch as he reflected aloud: "There is only one Monte Carlo in all Europe."

Renie, usually so even-tempered, frowned and clicked her tongue impatiently.

"You know quite well, *chéri*, it's impossible to beat the game at Monte. I thought you'd agreed to give up that notion for good?"

"I have."

"Then what *are* you driving at?"

"At a Monte Number Two," said her husband dreamily. "A gambling palace of our own. The last word in luxury. Furnishings regardless of expense. Rokeby Venuses on the walls. Tzigane orchestra to inspire one to valorous plunging

Exotic perfume in the air ; softly-shaded lights ; little tables at one's side for drinks and delicacies. We'll make Laroche croupier-in-chief. He looks *distingué* enough to——"

" Rubbish ! Even if you had the money to run such a palace, what Government in Europe would allow you to ? "

" None, obviously."

" *Chéri*, what is the matter with you to-night ? " There was genuine concern in her voice.

Hallard smiled reassurance to her. " I'm quite sane. In fact, I'm talking uncommon good sense. The scheme is perfectly workable. You remember last week at ' Wellwood,' when you told me that we can't live on the thanks of damsels in distress ? That phrase stuck in my mind, and here's the result. We did Nita Dennison a thorough good turn, and lost money by it, and now we owe it to ourselves to recoup out of her clod of a husband. This scheme of Monte Number Two is devised for Dennison's benefit."

" Oh, that's it ? That's sensible."

" Mind, we don't bring Nita into this at all. All we ask her to do is to invite us to her house for a week-end, so that I can get hold of Dennison for a quiet little business chat."

" I'll manage that," agreed Renie. " But surely you won't get Dennison to believe that any Government in Europe would pass such a scheme ? "

" Why ask them to pass it ? " was the reply.

\* \* \* \* \*

S. Worby Dennison had made his money primarily



in margarine—a wholesome, useful commodity, and from the business side a perfectly clean proposition. Dennison, however, was snobbish enough to be ashamed of margarine as a source of income. After a long fight with the law to get margarine palmed off on the public as butter—an unsuccessful fight—he cut himself clear of the trade and became associated with Westralian mining of not too clean-handed a nature. It sounded much more dignified than margarine, however, and satisfied Dennison's peculiar code of squeamishness.

He was a big, heavy man, heavy-jowled like a mastiff, with iron-grey hair and iron-grey moustache running into side-whiskers. His habitual expression was one of sullenness—almost of sullen suspicion. Rarely did he thaw into a smile.

But Hallard knew well how to tackle such a man. From the side of greed he was obviously accessible.

Invited for a week-end to Dennison's beautiful country house, perched on the North Downs between Guildford and Dorking—a house commanding magnificent views over the woods and heaths of Surrey to the north, and the tangle of Sussex hills and vales to the south—the adventurer sought carefully for the point of contact before enlarging on his scheme.

When he was alone with Dennison in the latter's private den for a good-night glass and smoke, Hallard began in his best "Sir Ralph Kenrick" manner:

"Had a stunnin' idea a couple of months ago. Pots of money in it."

"Why don't you work it?" answered Dennison, his mouth tightening as he scented a pull at his own pocket. "Lack of capital, eh?"

"No, not that—could get the money easy enough. But I'm no business man, you know. That's where I fall down on the thing. Now you're no end of a duke at the business game, I know, so I want you to"—Hallard struck a match, and paused for the frown of suspicion he expected. It came, and he continued—"want you to put me on to a man who knows how to work the business end."

Dennison's brow cleared at this unexpected finish to the sentence.

"Probably I *could* help you," he answered. "Let me hear the scheme."

"Of course this is strictly between you and me? Don't want some outsider collarin' hold of my idea and chippin' in ahead."

"Certainly—quite confidential."

Hallard began to expound with enthusiasm the plan he had already put before his wife, and his host interrupted him halfway with precisely the same objection as Renie had brought up.

"Impossible! No Government in Europe would sanction it."

"But that's the very point, old man! Don't propose to ask a by-your-leave of any Government. Anchor a liner outside the three-mile limit, and there you are!"

Dennison stiffened abruptly in his chair. The idea had hit him full in the eye.

"Anchor it where?"

" In March, Renie and I were stayin' at Rapallo. Know the place? On the Italian Riviera—stunnin' scenery and climate and all that sort of thing. I'll anchor my liner out in the Gulf of Tigullio, within five miles of Rapallo, Santa Margherita, Portofino, Zoagli, Chiavari and Sestri. All those places are fitted out with *hotels de luxe* and attract a moneyed crowd. I'll run a fleet of fast motor-launches, and have them all within fifteen minutes of the ship. How's that for a scheme? "

" They won't let you work it under the British flag."

" That's allowed for, too. My liner sails under the flag of Nicaragua, or Morocco, or some other country not too deuced squeamish to turn up its nose at backsheesh."

Dennison pulled at his pipe for some time, thinking hard. Then he raised one more objection :

" It sounds plausible enough; but why should people go to your gambling palace rather than to Monte Carlo, eh? I don't see any special advantage for them."

Hallard leaned forward and whispered his answer, as if he were afraid some one were lurking around on purpose to overhear and filch the great idea.

" I'm a gambler myself," he said, " and I haven't singed my wings at Monte without gettin' to know a thing or two about gamblers. I've invented a little scheme which'll fetch 'em like a fire-alarm. They'll be tumblin' over one another into my motor-launches soon as they hear of it."

" Well? "

"For six minutes in every hour—the first six minutes," answered Hallard impressively, "zero won't count on my tables. For three clear spins of the marble the chances will be as even as heads-or-tails. Can't you picture the scrum to pile on stakes for those three spins? I can—I know gamblers. And will they be content to sit still for fifty-four minutes until the golden moment comes round again? Not they—I know gamblers! Once bitten—twice as mad!"

Dennison saw two things very clearly: the one, that here was a scheme bubbling over with money possibilities; the other, that here was an inventor of a particularly simple and confiding nature.

The combination looked good to S. Worby Dennison.

\* \* \* \* \*

A week later, a 'phone call reached Hallard at his flat. He took up the receiver.

"Hullo! This is Sir Ralph Kenrick. . . . Why certainly, old man: very pleased to have a chat at any time. . . . To-night? Deuced sorry, but I'm off to Cowes for the motor-boat racin'. Back on Thursday. . . . Sorry, you know, but I never let business interfere with pleasure. Suppose you bring your friend along to Cowes? . . . No? Well, suppose we say Thursday evening, here? . . . Right-ho! Good-bye!"

Laroche was in the room at the time. "Another little scheme, *monsieur*?" he asked in French.

His master smiled assent, and laid his hand on Laroche's shoulder.

"Something big—after your own heart. A big-money scheme. A Monte Number Two. If it comes off, you get your share as usual."

Laroche's eyes glistened.

"It's not the money that tempts me, *monsieur*.  
*Pour moi, c'est l'aventure!*"

On the Thursday evening, Mr. Dennison brought his friend to Hallard's flat. The name of the new-comer was Louis Ohlmann, and he had been associated with Dennison in many City deals. In appearance and manner he made a complete contrast, having sleek, polished, raven-black hair, a polished black moustache curled up at the ends, and a very easy, pleasant, suave manner. He radiated an easy, friendly atmosphere wherever he went, and in business slang was "a good mixer."

"Very pleased to hear you carried off the Garfield Cup, Sir Ralph," he said as he shook hands cordially. "Motor-boat racing must be fine sport."

"Not so dusty," agreed Hallard. "What'll you men take to drink?"

Presently Dennison came to the heart of the business for which he had arranged the interview.

"Last week you asked me if I could find a man for you to work the business end of your scheme. Mr. Ohlmann is the very man for your purpose. He——"

Hallard waved away explanations.

"Your recommendation's good enough for me. No need to explain."

The two business men exchanged a momentary

glance of mutual understanding. Here was an easy mark indeed.

Dennison got down to essentials.

"With Mr. Ohlmann at the business end, I'm prepared to put some money into this myself. I can also get friends to put up capital. The proposal is to form a small syndicate, say for two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. That will be ample for the chartering of a liner, fitting her up in proper style, and staking the roulette bank. I suppose you will be ready to put in a hundred thousand pounds of the quarter million?"

The inner meaning of the proposal was obvious to Hallard. If he or his friends were to put up one hundred thousand pounds, they would be in a minority of shareholding against the other one hundred and fifty thousand pounds, and Dennison and his associates could practically run the scheme exactly as they pleased to their own profit.

But Hallard had no intention whatever of gambling a sum of that magnitude, even if he had possessed it. He laughed easily and replied:

"While you business men think in hundred thousands, we idlers think in thousands, you know. I'll punt five thou. myself, and, of course, there'll be some shares allotted me as the inventor of the scheme. I'll trust you to do the fair thing by me. Fact is, I've no head for business details. Business bores me, you know. What I want chiefly is the excitement of runnin' a Monte Number Two, and then the gettin' back of some of the cash I've chucked away on the roulette board."

"I quite understand you," answered Louis Ohlmann. "You're first and last a sportsman. The best thing will be to leave us to prepare a detailed financial scheme, don't you think?"

"Right!"

"You will be director of the social end, with your expert knowledge of the states and predilections of gamblers——"

Hallard smiled assent.

"——And Mr. Dennison kindly suggests that I shall be business manager."

"Right! Now let's drink a glass to the success of Monte Number Two. May the best man win!"



## CHAPTER XII.

### THE RIVAL MONTE CARLOS.

WHEN the draft prospectus of the private limited company, as drawn up by Dennison and his associates, was posted to Hallard, he read it with an angry light in his eyes. In return for the nominal post of chairman and a bunch of 50,000 deferred shares—which would be worth precisely what the other directors happened to vote at their individual whim—he was to be saddled with the full legal responsibility for the *bona fides* of the enterprise. If anything contrary to strict legality took place in the gambling palace, Hallard would be the scapegoat. On the other hand, if success crowned the scheme, and money came pouring in to the coffers of the company, the inventor would reap only what the other members of the company chose to vote him.

This was the “square deal” they had promised him!

Yet Hallard signed the papers they had sent

him — and returned them to Dennison and Ohlmann.

In the autumn, Ohlmann took hold of affairs and started vigorously to work. He made a flying visit to Venezuela, and arranged with a complaisant President of that stony-broke country that the floating gamblers' paradise should be allowed to fly the flag of Venezuela.

"If the Powers object," said the President in a grandiose manner, "they will have ME to deal with!"

Then Ohlmann returned to England and chartered an out-of-date Cape liner of some 5,000 tons. Under Hallard's supervising eye, alterations were made to convert it into a luxurious floating hotel and gambling palace. Roulette cylinders were specially constructed, pivoted on gimbals so as to allow for any rolling of the ship, and the whole vessel was re-furnished and re-decorated in accordance with Hallard's cosmopolitan tastes.

One mornign in the following February, the newly-named SS. *Fortuna* swung to her moorings in the glorious Gulf of Tigullio, under a blazing Riviera sun, while posters and press advertisements and newspaper write-ups proclaimed simultaneously to a super-civilised world that a brand-new pleasure awaited it.

"Roulette without Zero!" was the catch-line; in smaller type it was explained that for three spins in every hour the bank's claim on zero would be waived. During those three spins the punters would be on absolutely level terms with the bank.

Nowhere else in Europe, the advertisements pointed out, did the punter have such a splendid chance of fortune-making.

On the bridge of the *Fortuna* stood Hallard and his wife, Ohlmann, and the navigating and engineer officers, who would leave the vessel now that they had brought her securely to anchor and there was no further call for their services. Only Captain McIntyre, late of the steam yacht *Ariadne*, and an old acquaintance of Hallard's, would remain on board. The purser's and the chief steward's departments were filled by Ohlmann's subordinates. Captain McIntyre, Hallard, Renie, and Ohlmann had their quarters on the bridge-deck.

It was ten o'clock in the morning. Six smart motor-launches lay out on the mill-pond waters around the *Fortuna*.

"Let her rip, captain!" said Hallard gaily.

The captain gave a signal to a bugler; the bugler blared out a triumphant call, and the six motor-launches shot out fan-wise for the six pleasure resorts of the coast-line. The big game had begun.

Around them was a scene such as all Europe can scarcely rival. They lay in a half-lake of translucent lapis-lazuli. It laved the feet of a semi-circle of hills garbed in dark pastel pine and silvery olive, with here and there a solitary Noah's-ark cypress standing sentinel. The slopes were dotted with the little white Noah's-ark houses of the olive farmers, and back behind the slopes peered the rugged peaks and cliffs of the snow-capped Apennines. There to the

north lay Rapallo, cosy in its nest of hills ; there to the north-west lay Portofino, snuggling into its tiny bay ; there to the south-east lay Sestri Levante, ablaze with sunlight. Santa Margherita, Zoagli, Chiavari—they all smiled welcome to the ship of fortune lazing at anchor before them.

Through marine-glasses the party on the bridge watched eagerly the transit of the launches. What human cargo would they bring back ? was the question on every one's lips.

"Those ads ought to fetch them," murmured Ohlmann, his habitual smile for once in a way clouded over by a strain of anxiety.

"They will !" retorted Hallard with cheerful confidence.

And he was right. The launches came back laden with passengers—some merely curious to see over the ship, but most of them eager to woo the goddess of fortune. Soon the croupiers were busy raking in and paying out over the green tables. At the end of the first day, when midnight sounded a halt to the click of the roulette balls, the success of the scheme was assured. Ohlmann bubbled over with smiles.

On the following day, the launches were busier still. Hallard and his wife were watching from the bridge a stream of passengers ascending the companion ladder, when suddenly Renie touched his arm.

"Ratislaw !" she whispered.

Hallard looked where she indicated, and at the same moment the man in question raised his eye

and recognised them. It was Count Ratislaw, the silky Austrian he had bluffed out of the diamond necklace on board the *Ariadne*, off Constantinople. The Count raised his hat with a calculated smile of greeting.

"D——!" muttered Hallard under his breath. The Austrian had sworn to get even with him some day, and who could tell what spoke he might not thrust into their wheel?

"Suppose we refuse him admittance?" whispered Renie to her husband.

"What good would that do?"

However, he called up the gaming-room detective over the 'phone, and ordered him to keep an eye on the Count's movements.

The Austrian did not stay long on board. After making a tour of the ship and staking a few louis on the tables, he left for Rapallo and betook himself to the telegraph office.

The very next day the Italian Government seemed to wake up to the situation.

Italy makes a very handsome income out of the public lottery, which is a form of gambling where the bank has a clear "rake-off" of ten per cent. Here was a rival sitting at its doorstep and grossly undercutting its terms. A highly annoying situation.

A local official, with a wealth of gold lace, a cock's plumage in his hat, a sword, and a fiercely up-turned moustache, came out to the *Fortuna*. Hallard and Ohlmann received him at the gangway with perfect politeness; showed him the ship's papers,

made out in the nationality of Venezuela ; pointed out the clear four miles from shore that kept them outside Italian jurisdiction ; and offered him a drink and a smoke. He left visibly crestfallen.

Then the Italian officials began a pin-prick policy of hindrance. As each launch came to shore, the local customs officers began a deliberately leisured search for contraband. As each passenger stepped on to the wharf, he or she was cross-examined for dutiable articles. Minute little fines of a penny or a halfpenny were levied with cumbrous formality on a cigar or a scented handkerchief.

On the other hand, the hotel-keepers and tradesmen welcomed the *Fortuna* gladly. The gambling palace seemed likely to bring them visitors in shoals, and soon they began to protest in vigorous fashion against the petty maliciousness of the customs officials.

Count Ratislaw, strolling on the quayside at Rapallo, watched one of these heated altercations between hotel-managers and officials with a frown of annoyance. Clearly the *Fortuna* scheme would sail triumphantly to victory unless something drastic were done !

\* \* \* \* \*

A week of steadily increasing success had passed. The ship's routine had settled down, and money was flowing into the coffers over which Ohlmann kept jealous guard.

It was two o'clock at night. Gamblers had departed for shore, or were asleep in the cabins below. Tired stewards and croupiers were at

rest ; the ship's crew were in the fore-castle ; only Captain McIntyre on the bridge, and a seaman on the prow, kept watch over the *Fortuna*.

The weather was on the change, and a thick veil of clouds hid the starlight. A rising wind droned a monotone of sound in the rigging, and low waves slapped now and again against the ship's plates in impotent petulance.

Out of the black darkness to the west a motor-boat purred its way towards the riding-lights of the *Fortuna*. A cable's length away it stopped, and a tiny dinghy put off from it with one man aboard. He made silently to underneath the stern of the liner, fastened up to a rudder-chain, and climbed aboard by a rope hanging carelessly over the side.

He was a tall man, with a mask completely covering his face. Under his cloak he held something that bulged outwards menacingly. He seemed to know the bearings of the ship, and made without hesitation, though with extreme caution, towards the bridge.

Captain McIntyre, slowly pacing from side to side in a mechanical turn-and-turn-about, heard a noise of footsteps on the bridge-ladder, and turned brusquely to meet a levelled revolver.

"Keep quiet, or I shoot!" whispered a voice full of menace, speaking in French.

The captain was a brave man, but he was helpless in face of this utterly unexpected attack.

"One cry, and you are a dead man!" whispered the masked figure again.

With curt gestures he ordered the captain to precede him to the quarters on the bridge, and then



to knock at the door of Ohlmann's suite. Louis Ohlmann came to the door in his pyjamas, his eyes blinking at the sudden awakening; and the revolver was turned upon him.

"Keep quiet, or I shoot!" was the menacing whisper of the unknown. He ordered the two men into the salon of the suite, and closed the door.

"Give me the keys of the safe," he ordered with brutal curtness.

"I won't give them up!" answered Ohlmann, dead-white with fear.

"You won't?"

At this moment the cabin door was wrenched open, and Hallard, with a revolver in his hand, cut into the situation.

"Hands up!" he ordered of the masked man.

The latter backed to a corner of the room, where he could command all three, but he did not put up his hands. Instead, he rained a volley of low-whispered French at them:

"Don't threaten me! Outside is my *auto-canon*, with a Whitehead torpedo on board trained on your vessel. My men's orders are to loose the torpedo the instant they hear a shot fired. If you fire, or I fire, that will be the signal to blow the *Fortuna* sky-high. Do you understand? This is no child's play—this is earnest!"

"Who are you? What do you want?" demanded Hallard.

"I want the keys of the safe. I want fifty thousand louis as our price."

"Who are you?" repeated Hallard. "In the pay of the Italian Government?"

The masked man gave a laugh of derision, but did not answer.

"By heaven, I've got it! You're from Monte Carlo!"

Ohlmann collapsed on to a chair. "From Monte Carlo!" he gasped.

"We don't allow rivals for nothing," sneered the unknown. "Fifty thousand is our price, and not a *sou* less."

"That damned Count Ratislaw!" muttered Hallard, biting his lip. "He's put them up to it."

"Ratislaw?" repeated Captain McIntyre. "The man who was on the *Ariadne* two seasons ago?"

"Yes, that's the man. He's got a grudge against us."

"Hand over the keys, or we blow you to match-wood!" ordered the masked man.

Into the cabin rushed Renie, her face blanched with terror, and clutched at her husband's arm.

"Some scoundrel from the Monte Carlo Government. It's a hold-up," explained Hallard briefly, and then turned to Captain McIntyre. "Captain, the safety of the ship is in your hands. What are we to do? I leave the decision with you."

Ohlmann lay collapsed on his chair, his jaws working feebly, his fingers quivering like tentacles.

Captain McIntyre looked around him like a brave man at bay.

"For myself, I don't care; but there are women

aboard and asleep . . . Let him have his money and go."

From the locked safe they took out notes and gold, and the masked man picked fifty thousand louis in notes which bore signs of usage. The new notes he put aside contemptuously, and his meaning was obvious. The new notes would be the bank's capital, and might, perhaps, be traced by their numbers; but the used notes would have passed over the roulette tables, and their numbers would not be known.

"Remember," he said, as he left the bridge, "a revolver-shot at me would be the signal for the torpedo."

Helpless, they let him slip overboard into the dinghy and row towards his motor-launch. Then they heard the putt-putt of the starting engines, and a vague shape flittered swiftly towards the west in the darkness of the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

First thing in the morning, Hallard, Renie and Ohlmann went ashore to Rapallo.

"I stick by the *Fortuna*," Hallard had said; "but I'll not have my wife on board while this kind of hold-up is possible."

Renie's luggage was with them in the launch.

Ohlmann was full of bitter and futile threats against the masked robber. "I'll have every note traced back to the men and women who paid them in. I'll bring an action against the Monaco Government! I'll have justice on them if it costs me another fifty thousand!"

On the quayside, a ragged urchin selling newspapers thrust a *Corriere della Sera* into Hallard's hands. The scare-head on the front page caught his eye, and he opened out the paper eagerly.

" 'Drastic Action Against Venezuela,' " he read out. " 'European Powers Unite to Force Payment of Arrears of Debt. Italian, British and German Warships Blockade the Port of La Guayra.' "

He looked questioningly at Ohlmann. Ohlmann groaned. "Troubles never come singly. If I'm anything of a prophet, it means that the President will throw us to the lions as a sop. The *Fortuna's* days are numbered."

Hallard nodded gloomily.

"My scheme was too good to be true," he said. "Well, it was a gay time while it lasted!"

But his thoughts were away in the Isle of Corsica, where Laroche, having dropped his Corsican fishermen helpers and his mask, was carefully caching the fifty thousand louis against the time when they might be safely unearthed and passed into currency.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### ONE LAST COUP.

IN the following November, Hallard and Renie were at Pau. They were seated on the Boulevard des Pyrénées, facing the full blaze of the sun and the hundred-mile panorama of snow-peaks to the south, with the Pic du Midi, Queen of the Pyrénées, lifting her white head in proud sovereignty above her retinue of courtiers. In front of them passed a very fashionable, moneyed crowd of idlers, for Pau was filling up for the winter season. Golf, tennis, shooting, hunting, and mountain-climbing, apart from the magnificent climate and the gay life of the town, had lured a cosmopolitan crowd to the capital of the ancient kingdom of Béarn.

“What’s fifty thousand pounds?” asked Hallard, apparently *à propos* of nothing in particular.

“Two thousand a year,” answered Renie promptly.

“And what’s two thousand a year?” pursued

her husband dreamily, and then started to answer his own rhetorical question.

"Patrician poverty. A town house, and take in paying guests for the London season. A couple of motors, and growl at the tyre-bills. Look at every five half a dozen times before you part with it. Two thousand a year is no use to us, my dear."

"*Chéri*, I'd like to settle down."

"And so you shall. One last *coup* to turn this fifty thousand into a hundred thousand, and then *nous nous rangons*. Then it's to be good-bye to the game."

The fifty thousand in Hallard's thoughts were mostly the proceeds of the "hold-up" of the *Fortuna*. The ship had been compelled eventually to haul down the flag of Venezuela, and had crept ignominiously away from the gambling preserves of an outraged Italian Government. Then Hallard and Laroche had dug up and cashed the fifty thousand louis. Forty thousand went to the credit of Hallard's account with the banking-house of Edwardes, Colcred, and Co., making his total capital somewhere between fifty and sixty thousand sterling.

The other ten thousand louis were invested by Laroche in all sorts of queer premium bonds and wild-cat enterprises, for which he had a peculiar hankering. He liked to watch the Bourse lists, and see them rocketing up and down. Mostly it was down, for Laroche was no judge of investments. But the excitement gave him undoubted pleasure.

Renie looked very thoughtful after her husband's last words. She hated to put into his mind a doubt

of his own powers, and yet there were deep misgivings in hers. From a clouded parentage and a boyhood of stinted means, Hallard had created for himself the style and position of "Sir Ralph Kenrick." On his way up he had taken Renie from behind the counters of a jewellery establishment, had made her Lady Kenrick, and had given her all her heart's desires, so far as they lay in his power.

*Was it the moment to stop or to go on higher?*

"What made you think of that one last *coup*?" she asked hesitantly.

"This crowd for one thing—they reek of money. The Château de Rovecq, for another."

"That place in the mountains we went over last week. What was there in it to suggest a scheme?"

"The secret staircase leading to the guest-chamber."

"Where they murdered the young Comte de Foix?"

"Yes."

Renie shuddered involuntarily.

"That room gave me the creeps."

"I'm thinking of buying up the Château. It's for sale, you remember. Twenty-five thousand would buy it. That would leave twenty-five thousand odd for the other necessities."

"What's this strange scheme you've got in mind? I don't see any chance of money-making at all. Who would buy the place from you, even if you put it in order?"

"We can't discuss the plan now—some one might



overhear. Let's take a walk along the Gave de Pau."

\* \* \* \* \*

Three months later, in early February, a wealthy American steel magnate, who was also a collector of art treasures and historical relics, was prowling around the antique shops of Paris.

In the course of conversation a dealer remarked :

"I might have had a most magnificent Murillo last week—small, you understand, but in the master's best style. No question about its authenticity."

"What was the hitch?"

"Sentiment, *monsieur*. Figure to yourself that at the last moment the wife cries: 'I will not part with it! The cherub is the image of my dead brother!' She weeps, and the husband gives in to her whim. Yet they are in need of money!"

"Where is this picture?" asked the magnate interestedly.

"A long way from here, *monsieur*. In the Pyrenees—the Château de Rovecq. They ask me to travel all that distance, and then, just as the sale is on the point of concluding, the wife refuses to part with the painting. They pay me my fare to and fro, and for the loss of my time; but I would much rather have bought the Murillo. So delicate, so tender, so sympathetic!"

Peter Brooks loved the zest of the chase almost more than the capture. With his characteristic quickness of decision, he took the night express to Pau, and there made further enquiry about the

Château de Rovecq. It came out that the castle possessed a definite historical interest, having been at one time the home of Godefroy de Salignac, and that it had passed into the hands of a young English milord and his wife, and was now no longer accessible to visitors. The new owners were in mourning, and did not entertain or desire to see people.

These difficulties only added further to the steel man's desire to get a sight of the Murillo. He thought out a ruse to get inside the Château, and acted upon it.

Perched on a crag of the foothill, between Pau and Lourdes, and some twenty miles away from the Béarn capital, stood the old castle. Around it were beech woods and a few scattered farms which made up the estate of Rovecq. It was a lonely, eerie mountain country.

A bogus motor-car accident late in the evening gave Peter Brooks the excuse for ringing the bell at the gates of the Château and asking for hospitality. He was a big, bluff, hearty man, thoroughly used to getting his own way in matters large and small alike. While he apologised to Hallard and Renie for thrusting himself upon them, yet at the same time his manner took it for granted that his request would be cheerfully allowed.

He found his host and hostess very quiet and subdued. They were dressed in black, and spoke in low, colourless tones. Evidently they had suffered a severe bereavement lately. However, that was nothing to Peter Brooks. He was there to see the Murillo, and if it pleased his fancy, to

induce them to part with it. He had no intention of paying a fancy figure, and he would have the painting examined by an art expert before the deal was concluded.

Renie offered him an improvised supper, and then left to see to the getting ready of his room for the night.

"I must warn you," she said, "that the room is supposed to be haunted. The tradition is that a young Comte de Foix, a guest in the castle, was murdered there. Unfortunately, there is no other room I can offer you at such a short notice."

"Don't mind that a scrap," answered Brooks in his bluff, hearty manner. "A real live ghost would interest me a heap. Over in the States, you know, we're too new to be long on ghosts. I reckon it takes a couple of centuries to get the breed lively and strong on the wing."

The Murillo was hung in Hallard's private study. The two men smoked a cigar together there before turning in, and Brooks arranged his chair so as to have a clear sight of the picture while his host was talking.

"There is ill-luck about this Château," Hallard was saying. "I'm convinced of that now. I bought it, you know, because it was once in the possession of my wife's family. She was keen on the ancestral home, and all that kind of thing, you know."

Brooks was thinking: "That's a Murillo beggar-boy, sure enough."

Hallard continued in his depressed monotone :

" One thing after another has happened since we took over the place three months ago. I wish to heaven we were out of it ! Even my wife has begun to realise that we made a mistake. We paid too heavy a price, though, and we'd lose on sellin' again. There's the rub ! "

Brooks was thinking : " Worth seventy-five thousand dollars, if it's worth a cent. " Aloud he said : " That's a nice-looking picture. Who's the artist ? "

" Murillo. "

" Ah ! Valuable, I suppose ? "

" Yes. I'd sell it if it were not for a whim of my wife's. She sees a resemblance to a dead baby brother. That makes it impossible to sell it—you know what women are with their whims. "

" I reckon you could get pretty near five thousand pounds for it at auction. "

Hallard smiled faintly.

" It's evident you're not a connoisseur of pictures, sir. I have been offered fifteen thousand pounds already. But, as I explained——"

" Any others ? " interrupted Brooks.

" Nothing of real value. "

The conversation drifted off to other topics, and soon they parted and went to their respective rooms.

Peter Brooks was a man without " nerves. " The gloomy, stone-walled bedroom into which he was shown by an aged retainer of the Château, carrying an antique silver candelabrum for only illumination,

did not disturb his composure one jot. He undressed calmly, opened his window wide, and went off into a hearty slumber.

It must have been midnight or after when he was awakened with a start by a blinding flash of light. For a moment the impression came to him of a visit to the King's Chamber in the Pyramid of Cheops, where magnesium flares were used to sweep away the darkness. But the fleeting memory was overwhelmed by the sight that confronted him. The door of the antique wardrobe stood open, and framed in it was a figure of a young man dressed as in the time of Henry of Navarre. A dagger was plunged in his breast. The face was deadly pale. Over it all was a ghostly phosphorescent light.

The figure slowly raised its arm and beckoned to him. Then it seemed to disappear into the depths of the *armoire*, still beckoning, as though it were a command for the visitor to follow.

Brooks jumped out of bed and lit the candles. He took them over to the *armoire* in which the ghostly figure had disappeared. And there he noted a crack in the woodwork.

He opened a pocket-knife, and ran the blade into the crack. The crack widened, and a whole panel slid back smoothly. Behind was a cavity—stone steps—a secret staircase in the wall.

Brooks stepped inside with his candelabrum. Here was an adventure. He would see where it led him to. Of ghosts, as such, he had no fear, and against anything more material he had his fists.

The staircase wound upwards to directly over

his bedroom. Then it opened out into a windowless room, long and broad, but low as a cellar-room.

"Great Solomon!" he gasped as the light from his candles fell around the room. There, dusty and overlaid with cobwebs, lay suits of armour, helmets, swords, all heavily chased; drinking cups and plates of antique pattern; and a pile of pictures laid one upon another. He took the latter up and let the light fall full upon them.

Two of them he carried downstairs, dusted, and examined in the light of the open window. Then he whistled low and long, took them up to the attic again, and ran over the whole jumble of objects in mental addition of their worth.

As he was moving some of the armour to one side, a sight came to him which caused him to hastily drop it and cease his rummaging.

There behind the armour lay a skeleton, the bones fallen apart, the skull grinning wide!

The steel magnate went down to his room, carefully closed the panel of the *armoire*, and started some hard thinking. Like most other successful men of business, he was scrupulously honest in the small things. If one of his foundries were to overcharge a customer fifty cents, and he were to get to hear of it, he would have that fifty cents returned at once with a personally-signed letter of apology. But in the big deals, his code of ethics was altogether different. In a big deal, the other man had to keep his jacket buttoned tight and both hands in his trouser-pockets.

The result of Brooks' thinking came to the open



at breakfast the next morning with his host and hostess.

"I had a visitor last night," he mentioned casually as he bit into his rolls with a hearty appetite.

"You mean——?" asked Renie.

"I do. The same. The young man with the dagger and the rest of the trimmings."

"I'm so awfully sorry."

"Not at all! I've quite taken a fancy to him. The fact is, I've always wanted a ghost of my very own. Now that I see you've got the real goods, I'd be willing to buy him from you at a reasonable figure."

"Buy the ghost?"

"Buy the Château. I take it that everything inside it, ghost included, would go with the place?"

"Oh, if you only could take it off our hands!" answered Renie, her face lighting up. "We made such a mistake in buying the place at all."

"Everything inside it?" questioned Hallard. "You mean the Murillo as well?"

"I do. That's essential."

Hallard looked at his wife pleadingly.

"Yes, I will let it go," she conceded, with a brave smile.

"I'm a man who has to live quick," pursued Brooks. "I like to do business on the jump. If your husband will show me round the estate after breakfast, I'll be ready to name my figure."

After a morning spent looking over the Château in detail, the farm and the woods, Brooks and his host drove into Pau together to have the title



deeds of the estate examined and a deed of sale drawn up. Kenrick had wanted an even hundred thousand pounds, everything included, but the steel man stood firm at ninety thousand. That was the arrangement as set out to the lawyer.

On the next day, everything was to be ready for signature. Sir Ralph Kenrick and Lady Kenrick would sign; Brooks would hand over his cheque, and then Renie and her husband would retire from the game and settle down on the comfortable income of some four thousand a year.

It was at this crucial moment that Hallard's luck, which up to then had carried him on from victory to victory, suddenly deserted him, to lavish her wanton smiles elsewhere. An incident occurred which no planning, however careful, could possibly have foreseen or guarded against.

On the Boulevard des Pyrénées, Peter Brooks ran across Lord Lemington, Deputy-Governor of the Bank of England, taking a brief holiday at Pau. The steel magnate knew him well, and in the course of a chat, mentioned that he was buying an estate in the neighbourhood from a young Englishman, Sir Ralph Kenrick.

"I know that young man," said Lord Lemington, "and I once uttered a prophecy in connection with him. I told him that he would either end his career in the Cabinet or in prison."

Then he added drily:

"I have not yet heard that he is standing for Parliament."

"Prison!" repeated Brooks. "Would you mind

telling me just what made you get on to that line of prophecy ? ”

“ I will tell you this much,” replied Lord Lemington, “ if you will keep it strictly to yourself : He smuggled a load of dynamite into the gold vaults of my bank ; or, rather, he pretended to. The result was the same.”

“ Phew ! That harmless-looking dude ? ”

“ Harmless-looking,” assented the Deputy-Governor. “ Did you know of the floating gambling-palace, the steamship *Fortuna* ? ”

“ Read of it in the New York papers.”

“ It was operated by a private limited company. I had occasion to have the record of the company looked up at Somerset House. It appeared that the chairman and prime mover of the enterprise was our young and harmless friend, Sir Ralph Kenrick.”

“ Great Solomon ! ”

Brooks became lost in deep thought.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE DÉBÂCLE.

AT the appointed hour, Hallard and his wife drove into Pau in their motor-car to sign the deed of sale. Both were unusually nervous—or, rather, Renie's nervousness had communicated itself to her husband. He had become keenly anxious to have the affair settled and done with. An intuitive feeling was creeping over him that It—his luck—had been worked to the end of the streak. He had had a similar feeling over the gambling-table at various times, and it always preceded a run of ill-fortune.

In the lawyer's office cheerfulness returned to him. Brooks—bluff and hearty as usual—made jokes about the ghost and the way he proposed to tame and educate him.

The lawyer—a ferrety little man with a repulsive tuft of hair trained on a mole at the side of his chin—droned over the long rigmarole of the deed of sale. Château, farms, woods, easements, water-

rights, and what not were detailed in nauseous elaboration.

"What's that about the cascade?" interrupted Hallard at one point of the recitative.

"I want the right to divert that water and run an electric light plant to bring the place up-to-date," answered Brooks. "Candles don't appeal to me."

"I suppose it's all right," said Hallard, anxious to get the affair settled.

The lawyer droned on; Hallard read through the lengthy document once again; he and Renie signed jointly; and the cheque was handed over amid mutual congratulations.

"I'd like to take possession this afternoon," said Brooks.

"Right-ho! We'll pack up at once."

On the way back to Rovecq, Renie pressed her husband's hand and exclaimed in half-hysterical relief from the tension of the last few days:

"Now we're free—we're free! No more plotting and scheming! No more waking in the dead of night with a clammy hand on my shoulder to drag me to prison! See, the sun is breaking through the clouds—breaking through to smile on us!"

"I'd no idea the life was telling on you like that," answered Hallard with deep feeling. "You never let me know, dear. The game has made me selfish—I don't stop to think how it might be telling on you. Thank Heaven, it's all over now!"

"But when Brooks finds out about the faked pictures in the secret room?"

"What does it matter? We've sold him nothing

under false pretences. There's no mention of the secret room in the deed. He's entitled only to the Murillo and other things specifically mentioned. We'll have the luggage sent to Pau, and drive in the car to Spain, over the pass. We'll make it a second honeymoon, my dear!"

Renie snuggled close to her husband.

When they left the Château de Rovecq that afternoon, Laroche driving, Peter Brooks was waving good-bye to them from the donjon tower.

Directly they were out of sight, he made for the guest-chamber and the secret staircase, and hauled the pile of pictures into the daylight, examining them under a magnifying-glass with minute care.

Then, with his suspicions confirmed to a certainty, he hurried in his car to the village of Rovecq, sent off a telegram to his bankers to stop the cheque, another telegram to his lawyer in Pau, and himself drove to the town to pick up a police escort.

While Hallard's car was slowly climbing the hairpin turns of the pass, up to the snow-line, a second high-powered car forced the pace after them.

\* \* \* \* \*

The road became gloomier and gloomier as the mountains closed in upon them. The road clung to the face of the scarred cliffs, down which torrents fell to rush below frail bridges, and over these the car crossed to the thunder of waters. Perched here and there on the cliffs was the isolated hut of a goat farmer, adding to, rather than diminishing, the loneliness of the scene.

After a couple of hours of steady climbing they

came to a grey, poverty-stricken mountain-village called Ste Marie de Morgils. A rural policeman came out from the single *auberge* and signed to the car to stop.

"What's the matter?" asked Hallard in French.

The policeman answered in the harsh twang of the Béarnais:

"You are to stop, *monsieur*!"

"Who says so?"

"I have orders from the Prefect of Pau. A telegram came not five minutes ago."

"On what grounds?"

"I don't know."

"Then wire and find out," answered Hallard curtly, his nerves on edge with the strain of the last two days.

"I arrest you!" asserted the policeman stubbornly, laying his hand on the car.

"Not without a written summons! How do you know if I am the right man? This is an outrage. Laroche, drive on!"

"You will repent of this!" shouted the policeman after them.

"Oh, *chéri*, what does it all mean?" asked Renie, white-faced.

"We've done nothing against the law," answered Hallard. "It's a sheer outrage."

Laroche put in a word:

"At the top of the pass is the frontier village of Bourg Rodèze. There is a guard of soldiers up there. They will wire to stop us. Shall I cut the wires, *monsieur*?"

"No, we can't do that. We must keep inside the law. What game can Brooks be up to, I wonder?"

A turn of the pass brought them suddenly to a view of the winding road far below. On it was a motor-car speeding after them—a high-powered car with a dark-blue body.

"That's Brooks' car!" cried Renie.

"He can't catch us this side of Spain," answered her husband, making a swift mental calculation. But his face had grown dark with misgivings. In the blue car were two uniformed men besides Brooks and the chauffeur.

The road wound round into a cliff cutting, and the pursuing car was lost to view. For a couple of hours more they climbed up through the snow-line, chill and dark with the waning of the afternoon. Conversation between the three was fragmentary and separated by intervals of gloomy silence. How far behind was the blue car? lay constantly in their thoughts. And on what ground were there orders to stop them?

At length the toiling road eased on to a level stretch, and the snow-clad, grey-stone village of Bourg Rodèze came into view. They could see the squat stone pillar that marked the border between France and Spain, and the two guard-houses, French and Spanish, on either side.

At that moment a tyre burst with a vicious bang.

Laroche was off the car in an instant to adjust a new tyre to replace it.



But Hallard came to a sudden resolution.

"Drive to the frontier first on the flat tyre. Replace it there while the officials are examining us for contraband. Then find some other imaginary repair to make."

"You mean——?" asked Renie.

"I mean that if we are stopped and Brooks catches us up, we may be in for a rough time. Now, listen, Laroche—listen carefully. If I take out my handkerchief to stop a sneeze, be ready to jump into the car. When I do sneeze, start her off and drive through anything and anybody."

"*Bien, monsieur!*"

"What could happen to make that necessary?" asked Renie anxiously.

"I don't know. We must be prepared. Now listen further, Laroche. When you come to a likely place on the downhill road, send the car over a precipice into a mountain torrent. A motor-car is useless to escape in. You must take Renie over the mountains on foot. You will make your way to Barcelona, and get a boat from there to Corsica. You will take her to your own village, amongst your own people, and keep her safe until I rejoin you. Here's money to do it."

He pulled out a bundle of notes and a pocketful of loose change, and passed them to his man-servant.

"I won't leave you!" cried Renie.

"Dear, that would only hamper me. I can fight alone, but with you by me my hands are tied."

"*Monsieur* is quite right," put in Laroche.

"Besides, all this planning may be totally un-

necessary," added Hallard, in order to reassure her, but his misgivings had grown deeper. The feeling was surging over him that It—Luck—had deserted, like a rat from a doomed ship.

At the frontier, three yards away from Spain, a group of officials and soldiers with great-coats and carbines came out from the Spanish and French guardhouses respectively.

The car slowed to a stop, and Hallard and Laroche jumped out.

"We have orders to stop you, *monsieur*," said one of the soldiers.

"I know. We're to wait for a car coming on behind. Meanwhile, we may as well have the customs examination through."

There was no objection raised, and a Spanish customs officer began a leisured search. Meanwhile, from the *auberge* Hallard brought out a couple of bottles of wine and all the palatable food he could find. It might be useful later.

He also offered to stand drinks to the group of soldiers around, and they accepted greedily, though still keeping near the car. Laroche fixed on the new tyre, and then crawled under the chassis with a spanner and an oily rag.

Round the curve of the road from the French side rushed the dark-blue car, and stopped with a grinding of brakes on the outer side of Hallard's.

Brooks and the two gendarmes from Pau jumped out.

"That's him and that's her!" said the steel magnate, pointing.

Hallard went forward to meet him.

"What's wrong, old man?" he asked in his Kenrick drawl. "These fellows here told me we'd got to wait for you. Anythin' you want from me?"

He started to light a cigarette.

"I want you and your wife in handcuffs," answered Brooks viciously.

"Ah! What's the charge, may I ask?"

Brooks took from his pocket an official document, signed and sealed, and held it out in token of his authority.

"You're wanted for selling me faked goods, you smart Aleck!"

"What goods?" challenged Hallard.

"Water rights you don't possess. Assured me that cascade could be diverted for electric lighting, and now my lawyer tells me that you'd no earthly rights in it. *That's* what you and your wife are going to prison for."

Hallard's heart sank for the first time in many years of dare-devil adventure. The meaning that lay under Brooks's words flashed plainly upon him. "Water rights" were, of course, the merest excuse, but an excuse which was deadly legal. Faked pictures were the real grievance; but the steel magnate was far too shrewd to take his legal stand on that ground.

Brooks had been "playing both ends against the middle." If he had found the pictures in the secret room to be genuine, nothing more would have been heard of the "water rights." He would have won

on the pictures. But if these turned out to be forgeries, as he had strongly suspected after the conversation with Lord Lemington, he would have Hallard and his wife arrested first on the matter of the cascade he had cunningly inserted into the deed of sale.

Thus he stood to win under both contingencies. He had played both ends against the middle.

For the moment Hallard had thoughts of giving in quietly and standing for trial on the official charge. He would plead guilty, but urge that the matter was one of misunderstanding, without *mala fides*, and that it could be set right by cancelling the deed of sale and returning Brooks his cheque and his legal costs.

At that moment of hesitation Peter Brooks let out a sneer that showed up the situation in a totally different light.

"Lord Lemington put me next to some of your con. games," he said. "Now I'll show you the way to tame and educate a ghost, you crook!"

With that, a new vista of events opened out to Hallard. Once he and Renie were safely in custody, other charges would be heaped on top of them. The faking of the secret room at the Château de Rovecq would be brought against him; the audacious bluff in the gold vaults of the Bank of England would be adduced as evidence of crooked intentions; probably Monsieur Octave Bourdion, the Monte Carlo banker, would come forward as an accuser, and many another man he had bluffed out of money or valuables. Once down, the whole of his enemies would be

hastening to kick at him. If Bourdion came to the witness-box, it was Renie who would suffer, for she it was who had cashed the cheque for 250,000 francs at Bourdion's bank.

If they could not fasten a criminal charge on him, they would try to get Renie.

Renie !

And that decided him. He took his cigarette out of his mouth and said jauntily :

" Right-ho ! That cascade business was a pure oversight—I didn't understand what it meant. I'll come along."

" *With* your wife ? " said Brooks significantly.

" Of course. Turn the car round, Laroche."

Laroche, wondering greatly, cranked up and took his seat, preparing to turn round.

At that moment Hallard began to gape and reach for his handkerchief.

" Atish-shoo ! " he sneezed.

And then things happened at lightning speed.

Laroche snatched at the starting-lever, and his car shot forward with a snort into Spanish territory.

" After him ! " cried Brooks, and his own chauffeur jumped down to crank the blue car.

One of the French soldiers had laid down his carbine to pour himself out another glass of wine at Hallard's expense. In a bound Hallard had seized the weapon at the muzzle, and with two mighty blows he had smashed the steering-wheel of the blue car to scrap-iron.

The two gendarmes closed with him, but swinging his carbine like a flail, he broke loose and ran

across the Spanish lines, the two gendarmes at his heels.

Hallard turned round at bay, and then there came to him the inspiration of a lifetime. With the tail of his eye he had caught the soldiers hastily bringing their carbines up to the shoulder. In a moment or two they would be pouring a volley of lead into him.

He flung his own weapon aside and started to run down the steep mountain slope by the side of the Spanish road. Far down below, the road doubled on itself, to return directly underneath him before swerving southwards again.

Throwing away the carbine was his salvation. With a yell of triumph the two gendarmes started after him, and thereby covered him against the fire of the soldiers. The latter dared not let fly while they might shoot down their own men.

"Get out of the way, you fools!" shouted Brooks in English, in the rage of the moment, and they failed to understand him. Before he had got his commands into French, Hallard was a third of the way down the hillside.

The two gendarmes made to one side, and their comrades above took aim at the fugitive. He stumbled and dodged and leapt downwards amongst the boulders and rubble of the mountain-side. Bullets zipped past him. One of them made a streak of red on his scalp.

But down below, Laroche was speeding to meet him. Renie was crouching in the car with eyes

averted, praying that her husband might escape that hail of lead.

With a last leap of desperation, Hallard was in the car, and Laroche was driving them full speed down the road to Spain.

Up above at the frontier, Peter Brooks was cursing fiercely at his crippled, useless machine, and the fool police of Europe in general.

\* \* \* \* \*

A fortnight later, far away in the Isle of Corsica, amongst the relatives of their faithful Laroche, Hallard and Renie were building up health and strength for their coming fight against the world.

They had lost their money and their position; their name was now useless to them; they were marked characters. But they still had their nerve and their courage—the brain to plan and the will to execute.

They would start afresh.



## CHAPTER XV

### BACK TO CIVILISATION.

NEW identities for all three.

This was imperative if they were to get back to a place in that cosmopolitan, moneyed world which was breath of life to them. New identities, and the money with which to float them into being. Hallard and Renie were practically cleaned out. Their property of the Château de Rovecq was unrealisable so long as that warrant was out against them. French lawyers were sitting tight on the estate, drawing up a fresh bill of costs every week, until finally the costs would overtop the property and snow it under.

Up in the little mountain village of Corsica, Laroche's people would have welcomed them for an indefinite period ; but the prospect was not an alluring one. Early summer was beginning to wrap the hamlet in garments of sweltering heat, primitive odours, and a very complete collection of garden and household insects. A Corsican village is far

more dirty than romantic ; decidedly more interesting to an entomologist than a man or woman of the world.

Renie, who would cheerfully have gone through fire and whirlwind, blizzard and earthquake, for her husband's sake, found her limit of endurance at Sartanaccia.

" I can't stand it ! " she burst out suddenly after a night of acute restlessness. " We must go back at once—to-day ! "

" Back " meant the refinements of civilisation.

Hallard agreed glumly. He wanted to be up and doing, but when one is without money, civilisation is a hard life to go back to.

" Get Laroche to lend you some money," said Renie irritably. " It's yours really."

That was where Hallard drew the line in his twisted code of scruples. Laroche's money had been well earned while assisting his master in various schemes—by every right it was his own, to be laid by for old age. But, rather weakly, Hallard temporised.

" It's nearly all been thrown away in wild-cat company shares," he said. " Laroche can't lend us any."

" Can't ? Rubbish ! " retorted the irritated Renie. " You mean that you won't ask him to lend you any. You'd sooner see your wife eaten alive than stretch out a finger to get her away from this horrible hole ! "

Very reluctantly, Hallard approached his faithful follower on the subject of a loan. Laroche replied :

"*Bien sur, monsieur,*" and proceeded to turn out a rag-bag collection of share certificates and premium bonds which he had accumulated during the last few years. Distrusting banks, he always carried his collection about with him.

Of most of the share certificates, the kindest thing that could be said was that they would look very imposing if framed and used for wall decorations. There was one, a bond of a Central American state, which looked like a papal bull, and was worth rather less than its weight in redwax. But even the most incurable optimist cannot select twenty or thirty glittering investments and draw losers in every one of them. The law of chance militates against it. Hallard sifted out a couple of share certificates which seemed to be still in the running, and sent Laroche down to Ajaccio to have them valued. At a marble-halled Paris bank on the Cours Napoléon, Laroche was delighted to find a buyer for them at a good round sum. He returned, beaming, and handed the whole proceeds over to his master.

Hallard was deeply touched. "By Gad, you are a real sportsman!" he said. He divided the money into three equal portions, one for his wife, one for Laroche, and one for himself; and they set to work to plan the return to civilisation.

It was very evident that they could not, for the present, travel and work together. Although they were cultivating changes in facial appearance, it was too dangerous for all three to be seen in company in fashionable resorts where they would be likely to meet people who had known them as "Sir Ralph

and Lady Kenrick and valet." Renie decided to try for work in some jewellery establishment in Florence or Venice. Laroche would remain with her, as a titular uncle, to watch over her welfare. Hallard would "work" the fashionable spas of the Continent until he had collected the beginnings of a fresh fortune.

Renie and Laroche took boat for Leghorn; Hallard took boat for Marseilles.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### IN DIPLOMATIC CIRCLES.

THE "Captain Richard Masefield" who registered at the Hotel Bernascon at Aix-les-Bains was a well set-up, pleasant-mannered fellow, with a tooth-brush moustache and a frank, open countenance. The lounge and drawl of "Sir Ralph Kenrick" had vanished. The voice was now crisp, with a subtle military assuredness ; but there was no "side" or self-importance in his manner. He appeared to be just "a good fellow" with a fair income. His military record he dismissed with the modest statement of "Rhodesian Mounted Rifles. Amusing time, but no fighting worth talking about. Mexico, too—a little sniping with the insurgents. Nothing worth your listening to."

Aix in June is a Tom Tiddler's Ground. Money and jewels are glittering in all directions. Celebrities jostle shoulders or swish skirts against the notorious,

men of money mingle with men of lineage ; all nationalities meet to combine " the cure " with a round of select and expensive amusements. But, as with other Tom Tiddler's Grounds, there are eyes closely watching the money and jewels, and the man who hopes to snatch and get away unscathed must be fleet of brain as well as limb. Detectives abound.

" Captain Masefield " began a survey of the tempting field. A diamond merchant from Amsterdam ; a young French Marquis who had married a beet-sugar princess and was rapidly turning her sugar over to the croupiers ; a Polish pianist who had raked in money and kisses from four continents ; an English race-horse owner with a liver and an insatiable appetite for fast living—these and a score of other likely prospects he studied with the critical care of one whose living depends on gauging human nature.

The game he finally marked down was the most gorgeously-feathered bird in Aix—none less than His Majesty the Sultan of Bandorah. The realm of this potentate consisted merely of a vaguely-defined strip of desert and a single port on the Persian Gulf with the reputation of being the hottest spot on earth. But, strategically, Bandorah was a prize position. Germany wanted it—of course, in a purely paternal way. England wanted it—in order to bring better governance to its benighted tribesmen. France wanted it—so that the blessings of art and literature might descend as a fertilising rain upon the desert.

When the Sultan made his European tour, all three countries fêted him royally and sent representatives on his trail to see that he was not imposed upon by any other government with wicked designs of annexing his port.

The Sultan was eccentric. At least, he was eccentric to European eyes, though normal enough from the Oriental point of view. He always paid a gold piece for his picture-postcards. He enjoyed having three gramophones sing three different songs to him simultaneously. He refused to gamble at baccarat with anything else but perfectly new banknotes of his own State—of dubious value. The French Government insisted on having his whims respected, and sent Perrand, a big man in the Sûreté, around with him to officialise his eccentricities.

Germany despatched Baron von Mulhausen in his wake ; and England detailed Archie Fiennes of the Foreign Office to camp on his doorstep.

Hallard keenly enjoyed watching the comedy of these three zealous rival friends of the Sultan—but how was it to put money into his pocket ? He needed some scheme that offered a sporting chance in the midst of a pack of detectives. Hard thinking finally pulled down an inspiration from the clouds, and Hallard set to work to materialise it.

His first step was to obtain one of the Sultan's banknotes, at the baccarat-table of the Casino. The note was decorated with a portrait of the Sultan and his sign-manual in Arabic. This Hallard sent



to Renie, with very detailed instructions ; and in the course of a few days a small registered package was returned to him from Venice.

Meanwhile, Hallard was endeavouring to effect an introduction to the Sultan. That was by no means simple. For a casual stranger to walk up to the royal presence and start conversation was not only sheer against etiquette ; more than that, it would instantly excite the suspicions of Perrand and of every detective within sight. Accordingly, Hallard tried to establish an acquaintanceship with the police official himself.

The result was the snub complete and armoured. Perrand replied brusquely : " Sir, I have not the honour of your acquaintance " ; deliberately turned his back ; and brushed up his big moustache with an insulting indifference that made Hallard itch to knock him down. But a crook endeavouring to obtain a footing in exalted circles has to deny himself many indulgences. He cannot afford, for one point, to start quarrels with high police officials. Hallard had to take the insult in silence.

Next, he turned to the Baron, who happened to be staying at his own hotel, the Bernascon. Von Mulhausen was an extremely large man in all directions—length, breadth, and fore-and-aftness. He towered above any man of average height and blanketed him by sheer size. The Baron looked down on Hallard as on some newcomer from the land of Lilliput, and answered : " Sir ? "

" I was saying, great luck you seemed to have at

the tables last night. Wish I had your secret of winning."

"It is a gift," said the Baron in a tone of voice that meant, "What the devil has that got to do with you?"

"I'm here chiefly for the cure. Got rheumatic fever out in Rhodesia, and——"

"Excuse me," interrupted von Mulhausen. "A friend is beckoning to me. We shall meet later, no doubt. Good-day, sir," and strode off uncompromisingly.

Hallard then made a set at his fellow-countryman. Fiennes was a stiff little fellow, decidedly self-important, and close as an oyster on all topics affecting or seeming to affect his mission. Progress towards acquaintanceship was discouraging until Hallard managed to find one subject on which the young diplomat was human—motor-boat sport. At that date, hydroplanes were just coming into existence, and Lac du Bourget, a mile away from Aix, offered a fine experimental ground. What Hallard did not know about motor-boats—he who had carried off cup after cup with his *Flying Fish*—was not worth learning. So he hired one of the new hydroplanes, and invited Fiennes to "come along for a forty-knot spin."

That proved the right opening.

Two days later, after the arrival of the package from Venice, Hallard remarked to the young diplomat:

"Found a curious little charm near the Sultan's villa this morning. D'you know if it's his?"

He produced a small pendant in lapis-lazuli, heart-shaped, enclosed with a gold band, and engraved on the one side with the Sultan's sign-manual in Arabic, and on the other with a swastika—that immemorial symbol of good luck. Its value was trifling—a couple of pounds—but it was a neat specimen of Venetian workmanship.

At the mention of the word "Sultan," Fiennes' face assumed the non-committal aspect of an oyster. He took over the pendant, examined it, and said, "H'm."

"Do you know what the writing on it means?" asked Hallard.

"Probably Arabic," answered Fiennes woodenly.

"I expect it belongs to the Sultan."

"It might."

"Then I'd better return it to him?"

"H'm!"

"Perhaps it would be more regular to hand it over to Perrand?"

It struck Fiennes that he might score a point in the diplomatic game by returning the pendant himself to the Sultan. So he answered:

"I don't think so."

"One never knows what the right etiquette is with these Oriental big guns," pursued Hallard, putting out his hand for the pendant to be given back to him.

Fiennes made no move to return it. "If you like, I'll hand it myself to the Sultan," he ventured with an elaborate casualness.

“ Thanks,” said Hallard. “ Shall we stroll along together now and find him ? ”

That was not at all Fiennes’ own idea on the subject. If there were any credit to be obtained from the act of restitution, he wanted it for himself. But it was very difficult to refuse Hallard without being unconscionably rude.

They set off together for the Sultan’s private villa. This was a fine property belonging to the Duc de Vaucluse, and rented by him to the Sultan for the present stay at Aix. It was situated on the low hill between the town and the lakeside ; with a view that was sheer delight to the eye. Facing east, one looked over trim, ordered, finely-nurtured Aix, set in a valley unsurpassed for the perfect freshness and delicate softness of its verdure ; to the west lay the restful peace of gentle Lac du Bourget, unsoiled by town or village, an aristocrat among lakes. Beyond, a mountainside threw up a jagged outline against the setting sun—commanding, yet subtly protective. All nature seemed to combine to offer homage at this shrine of patrician luxury.

The Sultan of Bandorah was an oldish man with a hawk eye and a fierce beard dyed raven-black. When they were shown in, he was engaged in buying a talking parrot from a dealer introduced by von Mulhausen. The parrot had been trained to say : “ Good health to your Majesty ! ” in Arabic. Unfortunately, the parrot was overawed by the occasion, or else out of temper, and it refused to call down blessings on his Majesty, even after being severely prodded.

“Go!” thundered the Sultan, in the voice of one ordering instant execution. The dealer wilted and withdrew, the Baron following him with ill-concealed mortification.

Fiennes introduced “*Mon ami*, Captain Masefield,” and explained that the pendant had been found by him outside the gates of the royal villa. The Sultan took up the toy and examined it, and his eye glistened appreciatively. He answered in a kind of lop-trot language that might best be described as camel-French. (It is here translated in the nearest English equivalent.)

“Good!” he said. “This lucky. Pay for it, how much?”

Hallard hastened to assure his Majesty that there was no question of payment. He was merely returning it to its rightful owner. It appeared to be a blessed amulet. He hoped it would guard his Majesty from all harm, and bring him luck at the Casino tables.

The Sultan did not think it necessary to mention that he had never lost the pendant. Possibly it was a gift from heaven, laid at his doorstep. However, with regal dignity, he insisted on making recompense to Hallard.

“We thank,” he said. “We make present.” He signed to a black attendant and gave a curt direction in Arabic. The latter returned with a cabinet-sized photograph of the Sultan, having the latter’s rubber-stamped signature. This was handed with due formality to Hallard, who accepted it with profound reverence and assured his Majesty

that it would never leave his possession day or night.

The audience terminated with expressions of elaborate goodwill on both sides.

Fiennes, outside, suddenly became human.

“ We dished the Baron ! ” he exulted.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE SULTAN'S FAVOURITE.

THE Sultan wore the amulet on one of his watch-chains. He carried no watch, having no use for the correct time, but made up for it with two watch-chains. The pendant seemed to bring him luck at the baccarat-tables, in addition to the fact that he paid out in depreciated Bendorah notes and received in good French notes or gold. When he saw Hallard at the Casino, he nodded to him with regal graciousness.

Hallard began to approach his Majesty with the ease of a royal favourite, careless of Perrand's hostility or the Baron's displeasure. One lucky moment, he managed to get a few words in private with the Sultan.

"I've consulted with an astrologer," he hastened to say in an impressive whisper. "He tells me your amulet is a symbol of Bendorah itself. The lapis-lazuli represents the Persian Gulf; the gold border represents the desert. So long as your



Majesty wears the amulet, so long will Bandorah remain safe from its enemies. Attempts may be made to take it from you. S'sh !”

The “S'sh !” referred to Perrand, hovering in the near neighbourhood.

The Sultan grunted understanding of the warning.

The Sûreté official approached with a coldly suspicious glance, but Hallard greeted him with a frank and open countenance and some pleasant words of commonplace which it was difficult to treat rudely without proclaiming oneself a boor. Such is the effect of royal favour on those who bask in it.

A couple of evenings later, the Sultan gave a dinner at his villa to a select party of guests. It might be thought off-hand that there would have been a rush to secure invitations through the channels of social diplomacy. But after dinner there was sure to be baccarat, and people were distinctly tired of playing with the Sultan while he held his peculiar views as to currency. So the party was limited to those who had something to gain by conciliating the Sultan. Other invited guests discovered previous engagements—regrettable but imperative.

Naturally Perrand was there, and the Baron and Fiennes. Hallard was also invited. He took with him a couple of tiny pliers of steel, with a fine cutting edge ; a lump of soft wax ; and a twin of the Sultan's amulet. The latter was a perfect twin, because the two had been expressly manufactured for Hallard in the same Venetian workshop, for the very purpose he now had in mind.

The measures Hallard resorted to after dinner in the Sultan's card-room were not burdened with fine scruples or nice consideration for the feelings of three acquaintances. On the other pan of the moral balance lay the risk Hallard was about to run in his audacious scheme—a risk that was real and personal, and might involve anything up to ten years' penal servitude if he were caught in action. Neither Perrand nor the Baron nor Fiennes would have any mercy for a crook convicted of trying to interfere with the delicate game of diplomacy.

Having suitably disposed of the twin pendant and one of the two steel pliers, Hallard took his stand by the Sultan, who was acting as banker, and remained there quietly for a full hour, offering respectful advice from time to time to the royal gambler. It was good advice, for Hallard knew the game as an expert.

On the other side of the Sultan stood Perrand. Amongst the punters, directly opposite, were Fiennes and Mulhausen, sitting together.

The Sultan had had a long run of luck. Absorbed in the game, he had no consciousness of Hallard's hand stretching out across his waistcoat and clipping off the amulet with one snip of the steel pliers through the soft gold link. Five seconds later, pendant and pliers were resting snugly in wax on the underside of the table. Hallard never stirred from his place.

A turn of bad luck came, and the Sultan, according to habit, put his hand down from the cards to touch his pet amulet. It was gone. He felt again ;

rasped back his chair ; searched the floor ; and then burst out thunderously :

“ I am lost ! ”

“ Lost what, your Majesty ? ” asked Perrand.

“ Amulet. Find ! ”

Murmurs of polite commiseration from the guests, who proceeded to grovel on the floor in search for the pendant. Loud cries from the Sultan ; further searchings.

When one looks for a dropped article, it is scarcely logical to suppose that it might have adhered to the underside of the table. None of the guests, detectives included, looked there. If they had, there would have been short shrift for Hallard. It was an essential part of his scheme that he should never stir from the Sultan's side, and the pendant and pliers were just where he and no other would have been able to place them.

The Sultan rose to a majestic height and swept a hawk glance around his guests.

“ I am stole ! ” he declared, and showed the severed gold link of the pendant still attached to his watch-chain. That was conclusive.

Angry expostulations on the part of the guests.

Then Perrand, from professional habit, took control of the situation. “ *Messieurs*,” he called, “ we will all of us turn out our pockets—is it not so ? ”

Nobody raised any objection to that, knowing himself to be innocent. It would be the quickest way to prove it. Everyone edged away from his neighbours, and at Perrand's directions, stood with

his back to the wall. The Baron and Fiennes were still on the opposite side of the room to Hallard, who had been particularly careful to keep entirely away from them for the last hour or so, in order to prove a tacit alibi in what was now sure to follow.

Perrand, with professional relish, went to the guests one by one, starting with Hallard, and examined their pockets. Nothing eventuated until it came to Fiennes' turn. From the young diplomat's waistcoat pocket the official produced the twin of the missing amulet, and held it up for all to see—in significant silence.

Fiennes flushed a dull red, and controlled himself with extreme difficulty. "I know nothing about it," he stated. "Somebody must have put it in my pocket."

Perrand shrugged his shoulders.

"I tell you I know nothing about it," repeated Fiennes with rising anger. "What reason would I have for taking the pendant?"

The Baron saw a splendid opportunity to discredit his adversary in the eyes of the Sultan while apparently coming to his defence. "It was in your pocket," he said soothingly; "but of course we all accept your assurances."

"I want to know who put it in my pocket!" retorted Fiennes, eyeing him with suspicion. "And I want to know how it was removed from the Sultan's watch-chain."

"It was done with pliers," said Perrand importantly.

"Find!" commanded the Sultan.

They were not on Fiennes. Perrand continued his search. The next man was the Baron. From his tail-pocket Perrand drew out a neat little pair of cutting-pliers, and held them up with another emphasis of significant silence.

Mulhausen did not possess Fiennes' fine self-control.

"You have just this moment put them in my pocket!" he thundered, pointing a huge finger at Perrand, and lowering his head as though he were a bull about to charge.

"Be good enough to restrain yourself, sir!" retorted the police official.

"A policeman's trick!" thundered the outraged Baron.

"You will withdraw that!" flung back Perrand, now livid with anger.

"For the last half-hour," pursued the Baron accusingly, "you have been standing beside the Sultan. We can all of us draw our inferences!"

There was a murmur of approval from the majority of the guests.

Then Perrand had an inspiration. He turned round and flung out his hand dramatically in Hallard's direction. "There also is one who has been standing beside the Sultan!"

For a moment Hallard flinched under the concentrated hostility that focussed upon him from all sides of the room. For a moment the sickening thought rushed into him that the detective had guessed how Hallard's conjuring feat had been worked. In that case it was prison for sure. But

an instant later the adventurer had regained his nerve, and with perfect coolness he turned to the Sultan :

“ Will your Majesty grant me a word in private ? ”

The Sultan was dazed by this rapidly-unfolding drama of accusation and counter-accusation. Who was friend and who was enemy ?

“ Remember, I warned you of this,” added Hallard in a low tone.

That decided it. The Sultan nodded a stiff assent, and led the way to an adjoining room. Behind closed doors, Hallard rapidly unfolded his case.

“ Your Majesty will see at once that this charge against me is absurd. I’ve not stirred from your side for the last hour or more. Fiennes and the Baron were on the other side of the table. It would be impossible for me to have slipped anything into their pockets.”

The Sultan eyed him narrowly, but the seemingly cast-iron logic of Hallard’s statement seeped into him. He granted a grudging acknowledgment, and demanded : “ Who stole ? ”

“ Your Majesty, it is a dastardly plot against you. Consider. If you accuse Fiennes, England will declare war upon you. If you accuse the Baron, Germany declares war on you. If you accuse Perrand, France declares war on you. All three are aching for an excuse to grab your territory.”

The Sultan knitted his brows and looked as if he himself would like to declare war on all three of the Great Powers.



"They are trying to put you in a dilemma," pursued Hallard emphatically.

"What to do?" muttered the Sultan.

"There is a perfect solution."

"What?"

"I myself will confess to having taken your pendant!"

The Oriental eyes glistened appreciatively. This was an evasion after his own heart. "Good!" said he. "You confess. I forgive. We go back."

He moved towards the door.

"One moment," continued Hallard, and lowered his voice impressively. "Your Majesty is surrounded by enemies. You need one devoted man to protect your royal person."

"You?"

"Yes."

"How much?" asked the practical Sultan.

"I want no salary. The honour alone is sufficient enough for me," declared Hallard nobly.

"No money?"

"Nothing but the title and authority of Chamberlain to the Sultan of Bandorah."

"Good!" The Sultan took a gaudy order from his own breast and pinned it on to Hallard's. "We go back."

The buzzing room stilled at their entrance. Hallard took the word. "*Messieurs*," he called, "I have apologised to his Majesty for my part in this regrettable affair."

"I forgive," added the Sultan.

The coolness of this confession and forgiveness



hit Perrand like an icy shower-bath. "But, but!" he stammered, "I cannot allow it! The law demands——"

Hallard interrupted him with curt military directness. "Enough! His Majesty has spoken. You may retire. He will see you to-morrow."

"But——"

"You may retire!" commanded Hallard sharply, and touched the gaudy Bandorah order on his breast.

A subtle Oriental smile hovered around the Sultan's lips. That was the way he liked his Chamberlain to speak. He laid his hand on Hallard's shoulder.

"I forgive," he repeated to the room at large.

\* \* \* \* \*

During the ensuing week, Hallard made it perfectly clear that the Sultan's new protector would stand no domineering or patronising from anybody. He snubbed Perrand openly; treated the Baron with frigid politeness; and assumed the oyster countenance when Fiennes attempted to question him on the Sultan's affairs.

At the end of a week the representatives of the three Great Powers realised that they had to deal with a man in authority. The Baron altered his attitude; made it evident that he was prepared to accept the new situation.

"We ought to be friends," he insinuated.

"It has always been one of my ambitions," answered Hallard dreamily, "to possess the Order of the Red Eagle, First Class."

Mulhausen was aghast. "There are five classes of the Red Eagle," he protested, "and the Order of the First Class is bestowed only on reigning sovereigns."

Hallard affected to consider this for some moments. "In that case I should be prepared to content myself with the Order of the Second Class—if there were a reasonable makeweight."

"I will report that to my chief at the Foreign Office," said the Baron. "No doubt it can be arranged."

Perrand approached Hallard in a like spirit of conciliation.

"It has always been one of my ambitions," answered Hallard musingly, "to possess the Ribbon of the Legion of Honour."

"I will see to that," said the official readily, ribbons being cheap.

"Of course, a Cordon of the Legion of Honour," continued Hallard.

Perrand hesitated ; then said that it could possibly be managed.

"And a reasonable sum for my expenses," added Hallard coolly.

When Fiennes approached the Sultan's new friend, it was with a certain constraint, for the British Foreign Office has no decoration to offer under such circumstances. He made a guarded appeal to Hallard's patriotism.

"We ought to stand in together, for the sake of the Old Country," he suggested.

"Of course," answered Hallard. "I'll see that

you're not left out in the cold. By the way, you are a member of the Gresham Club, aren't you ? "

" Yes. Why ? "

" It has always been one of my ambitions," answered Hallard dreamily, " to become a member of the Gresham Club."

Fiennes gasped.

The Gresham is a club where one instinctively puts a capital M to the word member. What Hallard was asking for would, under most circumstances, form a credential more weighty than the Order of the Red Eagle, Second Class, or even the Cordon of the Legion of Honour.

" My dear fellow," protested Fiennes, " we have to be most horribly particular about proposing new members ! "

" I know," answered the adventurer, and left it to the other to take or leave the condition.

Fiennes thought profoundly for some moments, pursing up his lips and conveying the impression that he was deciding on the destinies of the Empire.

" I think it might conceivably be arranged," was his guarded conclusion.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### A ROYAL COURIER.

FOR some three months the Chamberlain to the Sultan of Bandorah couriered his Majesty about the pleasure-resorts of Europe.

It was not a salaried post. The Sultan expected him to recoup himself out of commissions from tradesmen, according to a well-recognised Oriental custom. This Hallard ignored completely. He was playing for real money, not the stray sovereigns of tradesmen—and if he could only steer the Sultan to Venice, there was a scheme in mind which might, if successful, net him several thousand pounds. If unsuccessful, it might very easily land him in prison. However, that was all in the risks of the game. In brief, he proposed, having practically no money of his own, to gamble on the Sultan's.

The post carried no salary, and a great deal of worry. The Arabian potentate was as capricious as a *prima donna*, as greedy as a jackdaw, as tyrannical as a

nical as a slave-driver, and as close-fisted as a miser Hallard became, in those three months, unspeakably tired of him, and only the prospect of eventually inducing him to visit Venice kept the adventurer to his self-made post.

The three diplomats were a constant source of annoyance. For his trumpery ribbon and star of the Red Eagle, the Baron seemed to expect that the title-deeds to Bandorah would be handed over. Perrand, passing over the ribbon of the Legion of Honour and a limited amount of "expense money," had similar expectations. Fiennes took an unconscionable time in getting Hallard elected to the Gresham Club, alleging obstruction after obstruction, though possibly these delays were genuine.

It was some relief when Perrand and the Baron, tiring, dropped out of the running while the royal party was on English soil; but presently a new source of anxiety cropped up in the person of a Russian envoy, a woman. Clearly her mission was the same as that of the other diplomats: to get concessions out of the Sultan, or better, to engineer a "protectorate" over Bandorah. Being a woman—and a beautiful woman—she had a distinct advantage over Fiennes. The Sultan was an oldish man, shrewd but vain. It might be possible to work on his susceptibilities.

Now Mdlla Vera Marinoska was by no means an ordinary type. She was not a flaunting Delilah. On the contrary, her features were refined to the verge

of patrician ; her carriage and her gestures were restrained ; her costumes were simple and in faultless taste. With it all she had the litheness of the Russian and the quick tongue of the woman of the world who knows how to adapt herself instantly to any environment. She always took about with her a huge boarhound on a leash, which somehow harmonised exactly with her air of princess. If her birth were not exalted, she was certainly fitted by natural gifts to gain and hold a high place. In brief, Mademoiselle was a striking woman and a very clever woman, highly esteemed by the Russian Foreign Office.

While Hallard was couriating Europe, Renie was working through the sweltering heat of summer in the shop of a Venice jeweller named Nannetti, waiting patiently until her husband should arrive at the island city and endeavour to engineer the *coup* he had in mind, and greatly missing his companionship. Hallard corresponded with her, of course, during his tour as Chamberlain, but wishing to make matters seem as bright as possible, told little in the letters of his annoyances and anxieties.

That was, perhaps, a mistake. The impression Renie formed was crystallised in a phrase on meeting Hallard, when eventually he had brought his charge to Venice.

“ While you’ve been having a royal time,” said she with distinct bitterness, “ I’ve been working like a slave ! ”

Neither part of the statement was strictly accurate.

Hallard endeavoured to re-draw his side of the picture in proper perspective :

"I dare say it sounds like a royal time to be Chamberlain to the Sultan of Bandorah. But then you've not spent three months deferring to his whims and fancies." And he detailed a number of examples of the exasperating Oriental capriciousness. "Besides that," he pursued, "I've had Fiennes, the Baron, and Perrand trailing us around Europe, each of them expecting me to hand over Bandorah for a scrap of ribbon or a club nomination that costs nothing."

"Little enough you've got out of them!" interjected Renie.

"The ribbons will all help; and as for Fiennes, he promises that next week for certain I shall be elected. As 'Captain Richard Masefield, Gresham Club,' we'll have a real footing in society."

"We!" retorted Renie. "You mean *you*!"

Hallard began to be seriously concerned. This bitterness seemed very unlike Renie, who all through their varied career in adventure had helped him devotedly.

"My dear Renie," said he earnestly, "you know perfectly well I'm doing this for you. As soon as I've made a place for myself in society, I'm going to fall in love with you all over again, and marry you publicly once again, and then we'll travel about together just as we used to do." He bent down to kiss her, but she drew back.

"Just at the moment," continued Hallard, "I've



got additional trouble with my job. Perrand's dropped out of the running and given place to the Russian girl, and——"

He stopped abruptly. A further stiffening on Renie's part made him suddenly realise where the trouble lay.

"You surely don't imagine——" he protested.

"I saw you yesterday in a gondola with her," answered Renie very coldly. She had seen her husband and the young Russian girl in what appeared to be very cordial and intimate conversation, and she had drawn conclusions that were human if not particularly trustful. Love and jealousy were merely a step apart with Renie.

"That's all in the diplomatic game!" declared Hallard vigorously.

"Then leave the diplomatic game."

"I intend to."

"When?"

"As soon as I'm in the Gresham Club, and as soon as I've worked my post for what it's worth. Now that I've got the Sultan to Venice at last, you can help me tremendously. I can't carry out my scheme without you."

Renie answered perversely: "Can't *she* help you?"

"That's a fine idea!" returned Hallard promptly. "I'll work her into the scheme." He began to think hard, ignoring his wife.

His change of front from affectionate to indifferent had the curious effect of melting Renie. There were tears in her voice as she said presently:

“What’s the use of making money if we can’t be together?”

“We can’t be together unless I do make money,” answered Hallard. Then he took her masterfully in his arms, and his grip told more to his wife than a volume of verbal explanation.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### JUGGLING WITH RUBIES.

SEPTEMBER is not "season" for Venice. The show city is then still too hot and too mosquito-ful for the English and American tourists who constitute its staple industry. Venice in September is invaded by Italians—and by Germans and Austrians—who come for the sea-bathing on the Lido, the outer island of the group. They are not nearly so "do-able" as the Anglo-Saxon or the United Stater, but they serve to keep trade going.

Young Archie Fiennes put up at one of the smart hotels on the breeze-freshened Lido; but the Sultan, whose home-port on the Persian Gulf is reckoned the hottest spot on earth, enjoyed the swelter of Venice itself and rented a palace on the Grand Canal. Mdle. Marinoska stayed at Danieli's Hotel near the Piazzetta, strategically close to the Sultan.

As the opening move in his scheme, which involved a gamble with rubies, Hallard invited the Russian

girl to accompany him to Rapoli's, the famous jewellery shop on the square of St. Mark's.

"Why?" she asked.

"I want to buy you a necklace of pigeon-egg rubies," he joked, "so that you'll have a rosary to remember me by."

"Be careful that I do not take you at your word," she retorted.

"I dare you."

"Come!"

Vera and her boarhound led the way into Rapoli's. The proprietor, judging from behind the peep-hole of his bureau that these might be important customers, came forward himself to learn their wishes. Though a wealthy man, he never neglected business opportunities. Vera asked for rubies. Rapoli showed some moderate-priced stones.

"Better," demanded the Russian, and bent on passing an idle half-hour by teasing Hallard, she made the jeweller bring out tray after tray from his safe.

Rapoli was a keen judge of men and women as well as jewels. Not only millionaires and crooks came to his shop, but also a number of those who like to finger valuable jewels without the slightest intention of buying. He had to ask himself if these were serious purchasers or mere time-wasters. Vera, a clever woman, deceived him completely. Her close examination of each gem, her air of intense thought, made him judge that she wanted to buy. Hallard said very little, contenting himself with looking as straightforward as possible, until the

end, when Vera signed to him with a slight uplifting of the eyebrows that she left it to him to make the excuse for leaving the shop.

"These stones are fine," said Hallard, "but not unique. We were wanting something really unique."

"I will procure something unique," answered Rapoli instantly. "Will the *signore* be good enough to leave me his address so that I may communicate with him?"

That would enable him to make enquiries about the standing of the visitors before putting himself to any profitless trouble.

Hallard took out a card and scribbled on it, "Palazzo Sciavenna," then left the shop.

Outside, Vera remarked lightly: "Confess now that I made you anxious. You thought I intended to make you buy for me."

"I think you could do anything you set your mind to," answered Hallard deliberately, and left it to her to read into his words any meaning she pleased.

The Russian girl took it as a guarded reference to the state affairs of Bandorah. She had already summed up Hallard as a man who was not actuated by wholly philanthropic motives in his guardianship of the Sultan. No doubt he could be bought over at a price. It would be better sport to seem to offer a price, and leave him out in the cold when the time came to deliver it.

In this she somewhat misread Hallard's peculiar code of honour. He was bent on working his post with the Sultan for all it was worth, as he had told

Renie, but he had no intention of "selling" the Sultan. While he had not scrupled to take favours from the Baron and Perrand and Fiennes, he had given them no underhand political advantage.

As adversaries in the game of diplomatic grab, Mdle. Marinoska and Hallard made a well-matched pair.

On his return to the Palazzo Sciavenna, he was summoned by the Sultan, whom he found puffing heavily at a hubble-bubble. After the usual round-about preliminaries of the Oriental mind, the Sultan got down to the matter which was occupying his thoughts.

"The Russian," said he in his lop-trot camel French, "very pretty. Like her. Marry her."

He had already the four statutory wives of the Mohammedan precept, but one could easily be divorced to make room for the new favourite.

"Your Majesty," answered Hallard, "she doesn't want to marry you."

"Insolent dog!" thundered the Sultan.

His Chamberlain allowed the reverberations of the thunder to die away before he replied quietly: "I warn you again. This Russian girl wants to annex your territory for Russia. In order to get your signature to a treaty, she will go to every length but one. She won't enter your harem. I know her mind."

"She say yes."

Hallard shrugged his shoulders.

"She love me," pursued the infatuated old man.  
"Why not?"

“Then let her come with you to Bandorah before you sign anything,” said Hallard as a practical answer.

“Good ! I ask.”

The next day the Sultan had a private interview with Mdle. Marinoska, in which he advanced that test proposal. When Hallard saw him afterwards, the Sultan was torn with doubts. The Russian girl had handled him shrewdly, alleging that he did not trust her, playing on his infatuation.

“She say ‘You not trust me.’”

Hallard had had considerable insight into human nature during his years of adventurous career, and now he gave one priceless maxim to the Sultan. He answered : “When anyone uses that phrase, man or woman, business or love; *don’t* trust them.”

The love-sick Sultan ignored this genuine advice ; so Hallard felt it was time to stop philanthropy and turn to the pursuance of his own affairs.

“Why not offer her some valuable present ?” he suggested. “Jewellery. All women love jewels.”

The Sultan was wealthy, but close-fisted. He demurred.

Hallard continued : “Of course you won’t actually give it to her until she does marry you. Dangle it in front of her.”

This advice was much more to the Sultan’s liking. His eyes glistened, and he proceeded to turn out his jewel-box in search of the right bait. Hallard raised objections to one after another, until finally he had “forced the card” he wanted the Sultan to



take. The potentate sent him out to search Venice for a jewel which would arouse the envy of the Russian girl, and Hallard went straight to Rapoli's.

"I've got your note," he said. "What is this unique jewel you want to show me?"

With great impressiveness the jeweller unlocked an inner compartment of his safe and produced a large, uncut stone. It was a ruby of an intensely dark colour, almost black—like a thundery sunset. He had obtained it on deposit from a big rival jeweller in Venice—Nannetti.

It was at Nannetti's that Renie worked. Hallard knew of the stone—in fact, he had built his scheme around it, calculating that Rapoli would scour around to find a unique gem which might appeal to his fastidious customer. So far the plan had worked excellently. The difficult part was to come.

Hallard examined the stone very critically; made an enquiry as to price; and then started explanations. "The Sultan of Banderah wishes to make a valuable present to a lady," he whispered.

Rapoli nodded. He had started discreet enquiries of his own already, and knew something of the diplomatic game unfolding at the Palazzo Sciavenna.

"The lady's name is not to be mentioned," pursued Hallard. "You understand?"

Again Rapoli nodded shrewdly. That part of the affair was of no concern to him so long as he was paid good money for the gem.

"I want you to send a confidential messenger with me to show this ruby to the Sultan, together

with a number of others, so that he can make his choice."

"I will come myself," said Rapoli, who preferred to run no risks.

They went together to the palace, and Rapoli produced his selection of rubies for the Sultan's choice. There ensued a process of bargaining which lasted the whole afternoon. The Sultan was no fool when it came to buying gems, and he beat down the shrewd Italian dealer until there remained to the latter only a small margin of profit over what he would have to pay to Nannetti. Still, a profit was a profit. He took the Sultan's letters of credit for £9,000, handed over the precious ruby, and departed satisfied with a good day's work.

Hallard complimented the Sultan on his astuteness at considerable length. The latter knew he had struck a good bargain, and smiled complacently.

"I show her. She love me more," he purred.

"Better have it cut and set before you show it."

"No. Show first. Then set."

Hallard managed to get a word with Vera before the jewel was dangled before her by the Sultan. He said: "I'm not forgetting your taste for rubies. I've persuaded the Sultan to buy you something great in the ruby line."

The Russian girl looked at him keenly. Did this mean that he was making overtures to throw in his lot with the side of Russia?

"I am always grateful to my friends," she returned with a subtle undercurrent of meaning which invited him to speak out more definitely.

"How grateful will you be?" he fenced.

She smiled charmingly as she replied: "How can I say what form my gratitude will take until I know what I am to receive?"

"I told you before that I think you could get anything you set your heart on."

For some minutes they continued to exchange *pourparlers* in this highly generalised and non-committal fashion—the accepted classic lines of the diplomatic game. When they parted, Vera felt, like Rapolì, that she had done a good day's work. Hallard was coming over to her side. The Sultan was fluttering round her candle. Fiennes was quite out of royal favour at the moment.

Russia would win!

## CHAPTER XX.

### NERVES ON EDGE.

THE most difficult part of Hallard's audacious gamble approached. Vera had declared herself enraptured with the jewel, and had asked for it to be set as a bracelet. The Sultan gave Hallard orders to have this carried out.

He took it not to Rapoli but to Nannetti. Renie introduced him to her employer as an intimate friend, and all were closeted together in Nannetti's private office for a considerable time. It was a ticklish interview. Hallard had to convince the suspicious Italian that the latter ran no risks whatever in the plan proposed—which was true. If it had not been for the help of Renie, who had worked in the shop all through the summer and had won Nannetti's confidence, the adventurer might have failed completely.

"What could I do without you?" whispered Hallard to his wife after the critical interview was over.

"*Chéri*," she returned anxiously, "are you sure the Sultan won't get suspicious?"

"Positive!" returned Hallard confidently; but in his inner thoughts he wished the juggle with the ruby were well over. It takes nerve to gamble with one's own money, but considerably more nerve to gamble illicitly with some one else's. If Nannetti should turn traitor, or if Vera should realise how she was being worked into the scheme——

Well, those were the risks of the game.

He approached Mdlle. Marinoska once more, suggesting a private rendezvous at the Botanical Gardens. They could meet there without chance of being observed by suspicious eyes, he pointed out. Accordingly, the evening found Vera with her protective boarhound waiting for him at a seat under the shadow of some large stone-pines. The secrecy of the interview confirmed her impression that Hallard was coming definitely over to the side of Russia. He set to work to underline that very natural—but erroneous—inference of hers.

"The Sultan is crazy about you," he started.

She lowered her eyes as though in modest admission of the compliment.

"He is almost prepared to do anything for you," pursued Hallard, and added significantly: "If no one opens his eyes."

"Opens his eyes!" she protested with a show of indignation. "What do you mean?"

"Why should we two hold one another off at arm's length? Our interests are much the same."

"You talk in generalities."

"Then I'll be specific. I'm in need of money."

"Most people are."

"If I help your ends, I expect a definite return."

"Of course. But what recompense are you asking?"

"The day the Sultan signs the treaty——"

"What treaty?" she interrupted.

"Don't let's fence any longer. You have some treaty with Russia you want him to sign. Very well, on the day he puts his name to it, I want you to hand me over one of the two rubies."

"*Two* rubies! I don't understand you!" she replied, this time in genuine surprise.

"Ask him for a match to the thunder ruby. Tell him, say, that you want a pair of bracelets instead of one. He'll buy it for you."

Vera considered this thoughtfully. After all, it might be advisable to get something definite from the Sultan in case he should shy at the treaty at the very last moment. A couple of valuable rubies in her pocket would certainly help to soothe over that possible disappointment.

"The more value you put on yourself," continued Hallard, "the more he'll appreciate you. That's Oriental human nature as well as European."

The Russian girl had learnt by experience to examine a fair-seeming proposal sideways and back-ways before committing herself, so she replied with apparent indifference: "It may be. I will think over the suggestion."

A chilly feeling began to creep over Hallard that Vera was suspecting the rôle he had assigned her in

his juggle with the ruby. Still, he must keep a bold front. So he replied with equal indifference : " It's your affair. If you don't want my help, there are others—— Have you seen Fiennes lately ? "

Vera gave careful thought to the suggestion of asking for a second ruby, and decided eventually that there could be no harm in trying for it. At the next stage of the ardent Sultan's courtship, she broached the demand.

But at that point the Sultan jibbed—as political speakers phrase it, with no uncertain voice. He dismissed Vera, and vented his wrath on Hallard in a tone that might have been heard from the Rialto to the Doge's Palace. He called heaven and hades to witness that these infidel dogs of Russians were the entire limit in selfish greediness, and that their avariciousness was only surpassed by the vile untrustworthiness of the race of porcine Englishmen.

Hallard had the utmost difficulty in controlling his own temper. This unexpected check to his plans, the insults he had to put up with in his post as Chamberlain, the nerve-strain of carrying through a complex and dangerous scheme—all these combined to make him feel like throwing up the game, leaving the Sultan, and trying afresh elsewhere. But then there came to him the thought of Renie, who had worked in her shop all through the summer so that her husband might be free to make a position for himself and money for them both. For Renie's sake he had to go through with it.

He decided suddenly on a nervy short-cut. He would ignore the Sultan, and go straight ahead.



That settled in his mind, he went at once to Rapoli, and told the jeweller that the Sultan wanted a second ruby to match the first.

"Very difficult, *signore*. The stone is unique."

"We must have a match for it. The lady is determined on that point. If you can't supply it, my orders are to try elsewhere."

Hallard's emphatic tone made Rapoli anxious not to lose such a valuable customer. He promised to try at once. If such a stone was not to be found in Venice, he would telephone to Florence, Milan, Rome, Vienna.

"I'll give you until to-night," said Hallard. "The matter is absolutely urgent."

"The *signore* must understand that I cannot promise to supply the second stone at the same price," answered the shrewd dealer. He had made a small profit over the first transaction; now he scented an opportunity to make a large profit over a second transaction.

"We're prepared to pay a higher price."

"It might cost you perhaps £15,000 to get a good match to such a rare stone."

"Time is more important than price," replied Hallard with military curtness. "You must hurry. We can't wait."

Coming out of the jeweller's into the Square of St. Mark's, Hallard ran into Archie Fiennes.

The young diplomat smiled cordially. "I've just had a note from London to say that you're elected to the Club."

"Thanks awfully, old man!" answered Hallard.

"You won't forget your promise not to leave me out in the cold if anything important is happening."

"I'll give you a straight tip," said Hallard, and meant it. "Go and make love to Vera as hard as you can."

"I had thought of trying that," answered Fiennes, who liked to appear as if he knew every move on the diplomatic board.

"Then put your thoughts into action—and let the Sultan see you doing it."

Fiennes nodded emphatically. "I'll start at once," he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

That night Rapoli showed to Hallard a cut stone which was a perfect match to the first one. He had paid £13,000 for it to Nannetti, who had refused to part with it except for spot cash. Regarding it as good as sold to the Sultan, Rapoli had paid cash.

"It might be the twin," said the jeweller, regarding it lovingly. "In all Europe one could not find a closer match."

"It's cut," objected Hallard. "We wanted an uncut one, like the first."

"The *signore* did not tell me that," protested the dealer.

"Well, I shall have to see the Sultan about it. How much do you want for the stone?"

Rapoli asked for £15,000 in a tone of flat finality.

"I'll tell the Sultan. I daresay I can persuade him to take it cut,"

"I should be prepared to allow the *signore* a small commission," said the now anxious dealer ingratiatingly.

Hallard waved the offer aside: "I don't take commissions."

"You will put the matter to the Sultan to-night?" asked Rapoli.

"If he's in a good temper. If not, I must wait until he is."

Hallard, under cover of the darkness, made his way to Renie.

"Well?" she asked eagerly.

"We're right in the middle of things," said Hallard tersely. "Rapoli has bought the stone from Nannetti."

"How did you induce him to do it?"

Hallard explained briefly the scene with the Sultan, and his subsequent interview at Rapoli's shop.

"What a risk to take!" she exclaimed.

"It's taken now. It was the only way out. To-morrow I'll have to break the news to the Sultan, or the next day. It depends on his temper. Now I must see Nannetti and get my money out of him."

He made his way by gondola to Nannetti's private house. It was close on midnight before he returned to the Palazzo Sciavenna. The Sultan's rooms were blazing with light; but they were not so blazing as the Sultan himself.

"I dismiss you!" he thundered at sight of his Chamberlain.

For the moment, Hallard's heart sank. His

juggle with the Sultan's ruby must have come to light. The game had gone against him.

"Why?" he asked dully.

"The Russian. Fiennes. I see them in the gondola together. She is false! I have lost her! You muddle it! Vile dog!"

A hot wave of exultant relief swept over Hallard. The game was not lost! One more effort, and the tide of success would be with him.

"I'm sorry," he said contritely. "I oughtn't to have advised you to buy that ruby for her. I made a mistake."

"Nine thousand pounds I pay!"

"Your Majesty, I admit the mistake. I'll try to get Rapoli to buy back the stone."

The Sultan laughed harshly. "He not take it back!"

"I'll make him take it back! If there's any loss, it won't be yours. To-morrow, without fail, I bring you your nine thousand pounds."

"Go!" said the Sultan, but his tone was distinctly mollified.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stripped of its difficulties and complexities of execution, Hallard's scheme had been simplicity itself.

There was only *one* thunder ruby. Nannetti had cut it, and sold it to the eager Rapoli for £13,000 cash. It was the original stone Rapoli had sold in the uncut state to the Sultan. Nannetti turned over £12,000 to Hallard, and Hallard passed over £9,000 to the Sultan.

Nannetti was satisfied with his quick profit and a score off his rival ; the Sultan was satisfied to get his money back ; Hallard was left with a clear £3,000. Never in all his career of adventure had he gone through such a continuous nerve-strain for a mere £3,000. If the scheme had cracked up at any stage, the legal responsibility would have fallen on him. It was a small return for a very big risk, but it would serve. As a member of the Gresham Club, he now had standing ; as the possessor of £3,000, he now had capital. He could take Renie away from Venice. They could be together again.

They went, in fact, by the first train, leaving the Sultan and the diplomats to settle the affairs of Bendorah as they pleased.

And the Sultan, disgusted with the greed and fickleness of the European female, took boat straight back to his own country.

Vera Marinoska was left wondering just why she had failed to overreach John Hallard.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### BURGLING HIS OWN PROPERTY.

“**I** WONDER,” said Hallard in the reflective tone of a philosopher examining some problem in sociology, “what exactly is the penalty for burgling one’s own property.”

He lay in a *chaise longue* on the verandah of his newly-rented villa by the lakeside at Montreux, where he and Renie had repaired for the autumn, after that thankful escape from the swelter and the anxieties of Venice. In the distance the grandiose sky-line of the Dent du Midi revealed itself through the haze of his tobacco-smoke like a half-developed negative. He stopped puffing at his pipe so that the picture might clear—it seemed to beckon him to be up and doing—and added :

“That Murillo’s worth fully fifteen thousand.”

“Don’t talk of it! Don’t even think of it!” protested Renie. “Haven’t we had sufficient bad luck over the Château?”

“Still, it belongs to us, and the Murillo belongs to us.”

The exact legal position of the estate was a problem. Hallard could not lay claim to it without getting into the meshes of the French law. Nor could Brooks claim it, because he had never actually paid over the purchase-money. The estate was now eating itself up in the hands of the lawyers; the Château sealed with the official seals and slowly mouldering away; the farms contributing a meagre revenue for the benefit of rapacious attorneys and public officials. For all practical purposes, the Château and its grounds and farms were now lost to Hallard. But it might be possible to save from the wreckage the valuable Murillo. A plan for the salvage was occupying his thoughts.

"I know!" answered Renie with distinct impatience of her husband's short-sightedness. "But even suppose you *could* burgle it, what use would it be to you? Whoever could you sell it to without having the law on you? Pictures are not like jewels or plate—you can't cut them up or melt them down."

For reply, Hallard took up a local visitors' list, put a pencil-tick against a name at the Montreux Palace Hotel, and passed it over to his wife.

"Peter Brooks!" exclaimed Renie.

"Just arrived."

"Sell the Murillo to Peter Brooks!"

"His hobby is picture-collecting."

"He would recognise it at once."

"Of course."

"And what's more, *chéri*, he would recognise *you*!" A note of anxiety had come into her voice.



Though her husband was now "Captain Richard Masefield," and considerably altered in appearance and manner from "Sir Ralph Kenrick"; though she had recently been married to him over again in his new name, and had cultivated changes in her own appearance; yet there was always an under-current of fear in her inner thoughts lest some old acquaintance or dupe should see through the disguise. It was the penalty of being the wife of a crook. The adventurer and those dependent on him can never lead a care-free life. At any moment the past may rise up like the ghost of Banquo to confront and denounce.

"I'm reckoning on his knowing me," answered Hallard coolly. Then suddenly he dropped the pose of philosophic dispassionateness, and began to reassure his wife by an enthusiastic summary of the scheme he had been planning.

Renie was not convinced by his optimism.

"Brooks is very vindictive," she demurred. "Remember when he chased after us to the Spanish frontier. If he can land you in prison by any means, he won't spare money to do it."

"That's all reckoned in with the scheme," replied Hallard, and explained further.

Presently he added: "We made three thousand pounds over the Venice *coup*, but what with paying back to Laroche what we owed him, buying the motor-car, and renting this villa, there won't be much of it left soon. We've simply *got* to make money, and this Murillo scheme I've been hatching is the likeliest I've hit on for a long time. . . . Besides,

think of the satisfaction of getting back on Peter Brooks ! ”

That, more than the logic of the plan, decided Renie, and she began whole-heartedly to discuss the details of her husband's new venture.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Château de Rovecq, lying amongst the foothills of the Pyrenees in a wild, lonely, sparsely-inhabited country, was admirably situated for the purposes of burglary.

Laroche, now fixed up in the post of chauffeur for Hallard's new car—in fact, the car had been bought mainly to provide that post for him—drove his master to Geneva and along the Rhone valley to Lyons. There they obtained certain necessities for the expedition ; continued down the Rhone to Avignon ; followed the *route nationale* to Toulouse, and then struck across country to the Château de Rovecq.

Naturally they timed their arrival for the night. A mile or so away from the Château was a burnt-out farm-house, lying in ruins. Here they garaged the car, and proceeded on foot to their objective.

Laroche had, of course, been let into the details of the scheme, and he was jubilant at the idea of scoring off Peter Brooks. According to Hallard's usual custom, he had promised his man a percentage of the loot, but it was the adventure far more than the monetary return which interested Laroche.

The Château was deserted. There were no lights, no signs of human habitation. On the doorways huge official seals were affixed.

The seals must not be tampered with ; but if one could scale the encircling walls of the castle, the rest would be easy. Hallard produced a toy bow and arrows he had bought at Lyons—a plaything, yet probably sufficient for his purpose. Selecting an out-jutting corner of the battlements, he started to shoot over it an arrow with a light string attached. At the second attempt he was quite successful. They hauled over a thicker cord by means of the thin string ; and then, in turn, a rope.

Laroche remained below on guard while Hallard swarmed up the rope. Inside half an hour the adventurer was back. He had taken apart the frame of the picture, removed the precious canvas, rolled it up with great care, and replaced the frame on the wall. A velvet curtain usually hung over the Murillo—which fact ought to help to conceal the loss for some time. It was possible, of course, that the burglary might come to light at once, through the visit of some official. That was all in the risks of the game.

Hallard and Laroche returned with their capture to the car, and made rapidly for Paris, taking it in turns to sleep and drive. At Paris, Hallard paid a visit to an old acquaintance of his who quartered in the Montmartre district. This Monsieur Jules Viviers combined one quality and one defect in equal proportions : he was a splendid artist and a hopeless absinthe-drunkard. Naturally he did not pursue both occupations at the same time, and Hallard was lucky enough to find him recovering

from a bout with the "little white witch" and ready to earn money for a fresh encounter.

Hallard needed from the artist certain services essential to the scheme.

Within ten days the round trip of Montreux, Rovecq, Paris, Montreux was completed, and the adventurer was back at his villa prepared for the enticement of Peter Brooks.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### A DEAL IN MURILLOS.

TO obtain an introduction to Brooks was the first step. Simple as this might appear, it worried Hallard considerably before he could decide on the right approach. It was Renie, in fact, who made the suggestion he finally adopted.

Hearing of a young English artist of considerable promise staying at Montreux for health reasons, she suggested that her husband should organise a little exhibition of the man's paintings, and approach Brooks to ask his name for the list of patrons.

Hallard jumped at the happy idea, started on the organising, and sent in his card—"Captain Richard Masefield, Gresham Club"—to the steel magnate, with a verbal message stating the reason for the call. Brooks, flattered by the request, had him shown in at once to his private sitting-room.

"Glad to make your acquaintance!" said Brooks

heartily on Hallard's entrance. "Want my name to fill up a gap in your patrons' list, eh?"

"I want it at the top," replied Hallard. "Next to the Grand Duke's."

It is fairly simple to alter one's appearance in nine months, but to alter one's voice is much more difficult. The timbre of Hallard's voice struck Brooks as curiously familiar. As he answered with a joking rejoinder, he kept wondering where he had heard it before.

"If one can't be a Grand Duke oneself, I suppose the next best thing is to be next to one," he bantered.

"A title has to rank before connoisseurship," returned Hallard with delicate flattery. "Footling, but necessary in a list of patrons."

"I've no kick," said Brooks. (He was thinking: "Where on earth have I met this fellow?")

"Then I can have your name?"

"Sure! What am I to stump up?"

"Nothing. My friend doesn't want charity. Of course, if you like to buy a sketch of his, that's entirely your own affair."

"If it's good stuff, I'll buy. But personally I prefer Old Masters." ("I'll bet my shirt I've come across him before!")

"So do I," returned Hallard promptly. "But I can't afford to buy them at your pace."

"You collect?"

"I can't say I collect. Occasionally I pick up a small canvas—that's all."

The collector spirit inside Brooks pricked

up at this. He replied: "Where do you keep them?"

"In my London flat. If you're in town any time, and would like to see them, drop a line to me at my club—the Gresham." Then he added casually: "I'm taking back a small canvas with me."

"Old Master?"

"Murillo."

At the word Murillo, a wave of memory flooded over Brooks. That voice of Captain Masefield's was crisper and more decisive, but the timbre of it was the timbre of Sir Ralph Kenrick's. He shot a swift glance at his visitor, and the puzzlement increased. Was it believable that the fellow would have the polar cheek to try a confidence game on him *twice*?

"I'd like to see it," said Brooks.

"Certainly! Will you drop in at my villa and have tea? My wife will be delighted to see you."

"Sure! This afternoon?"

Hallard made the invitation, and after a few commonplaces left the hotel.

That afternoon, when Brooks was introduced to Renie, his doubts vanished completely. He might have been misled by a chance resemblance in Captain Masefield, but he could not be mistaken over both husband and wife. They were Sir Ralph and Lady Kenrick, and they were trying to work another scheme on him. They *must* think him an easy mark, to be taken in twice!

Nothing of those thoughts appeared outwardly. He greeted Renie as she greeted him—as strangers



meeting for the first time. He gave no sign of recognition—in fact, he did more, he set to work to make them think he had no suspicion whatever that Captain and Mrs. Richard Masefield were other than they pretended to be. It was the type of poker hand he thoroughly enjoyed playing.

If the place of meeting had been in France, he would of course have had them arrested at the earliest possible moment. But this was Switzerland, not France, and the offence he had charged against them was no extraditable matter. On that count they were quite safe.

Suppose, though, that he could pin a fresh charge on them——!

After the tea-table talk, Brooks expressed a desire to see his host's Murillo.

"I've not had it framed yet," explained Hallard. "I only picked it up a few days ago."

He produced a rolled-up canvas; unrolled it with extreme care; and displayed the Murillo. *The Murillo*. Brooks knew it on the instant. He had studied the picture very closely at the Château de Rovecq, nine months previously, and he was too keen a judge to be in doubt on such a point.

"I've seen this picture before," said he frankly, because it would have looked highly suspicious if he had pretended ignorance of it.

"Have you? Where?" asked Renie.

"At a château in the Pyrenees belonging to a Sir Ralph Kenrick."

"That's the very chap I bought it from,"

exclaimed Hallard. "Curious you should know him."

"I'm not boasting of his acquaintanceship," returned Brooks. "He's not exactly the kind of fellow one puts on one's visiting list. In fact"—his voice became confidential—"he tried to do me down. The fellow's a crook."

Hallard suddenly looked anxious. "D'you think by any chance he's played me a trick? I paid fifteen thousand pounds for the picture. It looks the real thing to me."

"And to me," added Renie, also with a note of anxiety in her voice.

"Let's see it in the light," said Brooks.

They moved out to the verandah of the villa; Hallard unrolled the picture again; and the steel man examined it with minute care. "It's genuine Murillo," he pronounced authoritatively. It was.

Renie unfurled a sigh of relief. "And it is worth the fifteen thousand Dick gave for it?" she asked.

Brooks pursed up his lips. "Possibly. Anyhow, going on for that amount."

"It would have been dreadful to be tricked by a scoundrel like that Sir Ralph—what was the name? Kenrick?"

Brooks could not resist an answer which tickled his fancy. He said heartily: "Your husband has proved himself a match for Kenrick!"

When he had completed his call and left the villa, Brooks set himself to some very careful thinking.

Obviously the Murillo had been taken from the Château de Rovecq—perhaps by Hallard himself, perhaps by some intermediary. What was the legal position under those two assumptions? He went to consult the best lawyer in Montreux, having made it a rule all through his business career either to have the law on his side or to get it altered on to his side. (The latter applying to the United States, where he owned a few politicians.)

The attorney, after the fashion of men of law, was full of ifs and ans, unlessees and neverthelesses, precedents and counter-precedents. His mass of wordage might be boiled down to this: If Hallard had burgled his own picture, Brooks had no case against him. The French Government would have a case, but they must prove that he burgled it.

If Hallard claimed, and could prove, that he—Captain Masefield—had bought it in good faith from a third party, the most the French officials could do would be to demand the return of the picture. There could be no criminal proceedings.

Brooks was highly dissatisfied with this tepid situation. He wanted Hallard in prison. He told the lawyer so, and asked for a plan. Another flow of legal verbiage ensued. It amounted to this. If Brooks were to buy the picture from Hallard, getting with it a document to say that the latter was the genuine owner and had power to sell; if he could prove that it was the stolen Murillo; then and in that case Brooks could undoubtedly haul the fellow into a French court of law, and once in France,

the old charge could be urged against him and all would end happily with the clanking of prison chains.

This piece of legal chicanery appealed strongly to Peter Brooks. He wanted to fasten a new charge on to Hallard, and here was the way to do it. It would cost money, but revenge was a pleasure worth paying for.

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Hallard made no further move in the direction of pressing his Murillo on Brooks. He sat still and waited for the other man to start negotiations. Of course he ran the danger of the burglary coming to light, but that was unavoidable. He waited patiently.

After a few days, Brooks was obliged to open from his side. Meeting Hallard at the tennis-courts, where a big show tournament was in progress, he began with the frankness which was his chief business weapon :

"I was rather struck with that Murillo you showed me the other day. I liked it when I saw it in the spring, and it's the kind of picture that grows on one."

"It will pair with another one I have in London," was Hallard's somewhat indifferent answer.

"Then you've not thought of selling it?"

"No—I only bought it last week. Met that fellow Kenrick in Paris. Are you sure he's a crook? He seemed a pretty decent sort."

"A crook right enough."

“What d’you know about him?” pursued Hallard interestedly, and plied Brooks with question after question, side-tracking the Murillo completely.

It was a neat little comedy of salesmanship. Hallard’s indifference had the natural effect of making Brooks more eager to buy the picture and so entrap the seller. The next day, he went direct to the villa and put a definite proposition to Hallard.

“If you want to sell at a reasonable figure,” he said, “I’m prepared to buy. As I told you frankly, I liked the picture when I first saw it at Rovecq.”

Hallard unrolled the canvas, and looked at it with a mixture of loving proprietorship and hesitant indecision.

“It would make a fine pair,” he mused. “Still—if you made a reasonable offer, it wouldn’t hurt to think it over.”

“Fifteen thousand,” said Brooks.

“My dear fellow!” protested Hallard, and going over to his desk, produced a receipt. This he passed to the steel man. It was a receipt in proper order for fifteen thousand pounds, signed by Sir Ralph Kenrick over the correct French revenue stamp, and dated to the time when Hallard was provably in Paris.

Brooks knew, of course, that it was a faked receipt, but he had no other option than to increase his bid. He offered £16,000. Hallard then asked £20,000. Brooks rose to £18,000, and declared his offer a final one.

"Give me a couple of days to think it over," said Hallard.

This fitted in exactly with Brooks' own views. It would take a few days to get a French official to Montreux to help in the final scene of his comedy.

"It's Tuesday to-day," answered Brooks. "Shall we say Friday morning for the yes or no?"

"Right!"

When the visitor had left, Hallard rang for his chauffeur.

"Laroche," said he, "you can take a joy-ride in the car."

Laroche knew just what that implied. He beamed jubilantly, answered "*Bien, monsieur!*" and at once set off at full speed in the Geneva direction.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the Friday morning, Brooks arrived alone at the villa. Round a convenient corner, his Montreux lawyer, a local gendarme, and an official of the French courts, specially secured from the Prefecture of the Hautes-Pyrénées, waited his pleasure inside a café.

"Well," said Brooks heartily, "ready to do a deal?"

Hallard appeared unusually hesitant as he sat in his study, shaded from the hot sun by the blinds in wallflower-brown drawn over the verandah.

"I suppose so," he answered indecisively, and looked with regret at the rolled canvas standing in one corner of the room.

"Here's my money!" said Brooks, and pulled out a cheque-book and a fountain-pen.

Hallard had been caught over a cheque of Brooks' in the former deal for the Château de Rovecq; he had no intention of repeating that mistake.

"Make it notes," said he.

"Don't you trust me?" protested Brooks.

"I haven't a banking account here at Montreux, and I want some cash to pay off baccarat debts," evaded Hallard.

"You don't expect me to carry eighteen thousand pounds in cash about with me?"

"I'll send your cheque to the bank and have the cash brought back."

"For that matter, I can go myself," answered Brooks with assumed huffiness. He had no intention of trusting Hallard's servant with such a sum in cash.

"Just as you please."

In about twenty minutes the American was back with the agreed amount in notes. He found Renie by her husband's side. She also looked regretful over the sale of the picture.

Brooks counted out the notes in front of them, and Hallard turned to his desk to write out a receipt.

This was the critical moment for the American. He had to obtain a set form of receipt from Hallard in order to make the legal net secure.

"D'you mind if I suggest the wording?" he said. "We ought to have the receipt in proper business form."

"Go ahead," replied Hallard, poised his pen.



“Received from Peter Brooks the sum of eighteen thousand pounds, in bank-notes to the value of four hundred and fifty-three thousand six hundred francs, for a picture by Murillo of which I am the legal owner and which I am fully empowered to sell.”

“One moment,” interrupted Hallard. “That part about being the legal owner is all right, of course ; but I can’t pledge myself that the picture is by Murillo. Suppose some expert were to come along later and swear it was by a pupil of Murillo and merely touched up by the master ? ”

“That’s not likely.”

“Still, in a business receipt one ought to be strictly accurate. Shall I word it ‘a picture in the Murillo style ? ’ ”

“Very well,” agreed Brooks, eager to gain his point about having the wording of legal ownership inserted.

Hallard then wrote out the receipt, signed it over a Swiss revenue stamp, had it witnessed by Renie, and handed it to Brooks.

“And here’s the picture,” he said, unrolling it to display it in the shaded light of the study.

Brooks nodded a quick assent, and Hallard then rolled it again, wrapped it very carefully in layers of tissue paper and brown paper, tied it with string, and delivered it to the new owner.

The American concealed his inward smile as he said good-morning and left. Now he had Hallard just where he wanted him !

Inside five minutes he was back at the villa with his

lawyer, his gendarme, and his French official from Pau. He wasted no smooth words on Hallard.

"That picture you've just sold me was stolen from the Château de Rovecq," he accused.

Hallard and Renie both rose indignantly, and Renie demanded :

"What right have you to say that ? "

"Every right. Here's an official from Pau who'll swear to its being the stolen picture."

"What do you accuse me of ? " asked Hallard.

"Selling me that Murillo when you knew it was stolen property. You had no title to it."

Hallard went to his desk telephone and fluttered over the pages of a local directory until he came to the heading "Lawyers."

"One moment," he said. "I'm going to 'phone for legal advice."

"As much as you please," answered Brooks, secure in his position.

Hallard chose a firm from the list, and presently was in communication with one of the partners.

"I want to bring an action for slander and defamation of character," he explained tersely, "against Mr. Peter Brooks, of the Montreux Palace Hotel. Also, if it goes any further, an action for wrongful arrest. Can you come at once to my villa ? "

The answer was satisfactory, and Hallard rang off.

"Now go ahead with your arrest," he challenged Brooks, "if you want to let yourself in for thumping damages."

Brooks laughed outright. "You don't bluff *me* ! "

he retorted, and handing the parcel over to the Pau official, invited him to open it and swear to its identity.

The latter unwrapped it with official formality, the lawyer retained by Brooks helping him zealously.

The picture was unrolled.

"Turn it over and read the signature on the back," said Hallard crisply.

Brooks leaned over to watch.

The official read out in blundering English :  
"After Murillo, by Sir Ralph Kenrick."

Brooks snatched the picture from his hands without ceremony and hastened to the verandah to examine it in full light. It was a clever copy of the Murillo, sufficiently clever to pass for the real thing in the shaded light of the study. Hallard had had the copy done in Paris by Jules Viviers. Nothing of the curses Brooks was feeling came to the surface—he was too experienced a business man to let his temper run loose.

"I've made a mistake," he said curtly, and took up his hat to leave.

Hallard barred his way. "First, you owe me an apology! What I sold you, and receipted for, was a picture in the Murillo style. You've got it. Either you withdraw that charge of yours, or stand for a slander action, or come into the garden and settle the matter as man to man."

Peter Brooks had no stomach for the ridicule which would fasten on him in a law-court over such a gulling; still less did he care for the prospect of a fist encounter.

"I withdraw," he answered sullenly, and left.

\* \* \* \* \*

One more course offered itself to the steel magnate. He went straight to a telegraph office and wired to Pau to start detectives on the track of the theft.

But he was too late. When they went to examine the Château, the Murillo had been replaced in its frame. Laroche had driven off with it on the Tuesday, made full speed to Rovecq, scaled the castle wall just as Hallard had done before, and *unburgled* the picture.

As for the copy with its ironic wording, "After Murillo, by Sir Ralph Kenrick," Brooks burnt it.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE WHIP-HAND.

THEY were settled for the spring season in London, and by virtue of his membership in the Gresham Club and his own pleasant personality, Hallard was trying to obtain a footing in society that would serve as a basis for some really big scheme. He needed capital and he needed credit.

An opportunity seemed to present itself in the case of young Eric Willson, a fellow-member of the club. He was a boy of twenty-four—eager, impressionable, well-meaning, and weak-fibred. He had always had too much money behind him, his father being a rich brewer, and rather proud of his son's extravagant tastes. The story of how the young fellow came to be blackmailed was no uncommon one in London or in any other great city. A trap had been laid for him ; he had been flushed with wine ; he had fallen into the snare ; he had been weak enough to pay the first demand for hush-money ; and

now the demands were growing bolder and more extortionate.

His confiding in the adventurer was a distinct tribute to the latter's personality. Usually the blackmailed keep their troubles strictly to themselves.

"I can't tell my father," he explained in a voice that would have been pathetic if its pathos had not been largely due to alcohol. "A thing like this coming to light would ruin his business! Tell me what to do. I know you're a good sort—help me out of this horrible mess. Don't desert me!"

"I'll think it over carefully and see if there's any way I can help you," answered Hallard, and that evening he broached the matter to Renie.

"Poor devil!" said Hallard. "He's being blackmailed."

Renie nodded a sympathetic understanding. "No wonder he's taking to drink," she answered.

"Suppose," said her husband reflectively, "we were to help him out of this hole."

But at this point Renie's sympathies gave place to concern for their own interests. "Don't get mixed up with a blackmail case!" she protested earnestly. "You never know what you may get dragged into. I'm sorry for young Willson, but he must get out of his own scrape himself."

Hallard did not agree. "I see a glimmer of something in it for ourselves," he pursued. "Willson's people are very moneyed, and if I helped him out of this scrape, I could get him to back me in some big-money venture."

"Don't trust to gratitude," said Renie sagely.

"No. But consider. Our position is none too secure. France is practically barred to us, and at any moment someone in England might discover that Captain and Mrs. Richard Masefield are Sir Ralph and Lady Kenrick, and then we should have to clear out quick. We can't rest content with a mere fifteen thousand pounds. We've got to make big money somehow. *Then* we can look the whole world in the face and tell it to go to——."

Renie had a strong intuitive feeling against having anything to do with the affair, and her husband's arguments did not convince her. Generally, Hallard was guided by her advice. If he could not convince her of the soundness of a scheme, he let it drop. But in this case he felt sure there was a big opportunity at hand. He overrode Renie's objections, and went to see Willson at the latter's bachelor chambers in Clarges Street.

\* \* \* \* \*

"If I'm to help you, you must tell me everything from beginning to end," said Hallard firmly. "I must know exactly how you stand and what bludgeon this sweep's holding over you."

Willson cleared his throat and reached over for his tumbler of brandy and soda.

"Drop that!" said Hallard briefly. "Drink won't help you to keep your nerve, and nerve's what you want to face this out."

The boy obeyed. He made a clean breast of the affair. It was an ugly case—a throw-up from



London's seething underworld of vice. Without a doubt he had been trapped into it, but the blackmailers now held the whip-hand over him. There were two of them—an Austrian baron and his wife (or a woman he called his wife). The woman had done the enticing and the man plied the whip.

Hallard looked grave when the recital had finished.

"There only one thing to do," he answered. "Have the man's record investigated. Find out something against him, and then frighten him into quitting. I'll get hold of a reliable private detective and have him trace the fellow's record."

But to this Willson objected with the obstinacy of weakness. He was afraid of private detectives—he had heard that they were blackmailers themselves. They might get him into a worse hole. Wouldn't Hallard see the baron himself and frighten him?

"Give me his address," said Hallard. "I'll find out what sort of man he is."

Willson scribbled the address on one of his cards. It was a house in St. John's Wood, that quiet, reserved, secretive suburb which hides more mysteries and shady happenings to the square yard than any other district in London. Hallard went to reconnoitre the house. He was not enamoured of the rôle of detective, but if it would serve to help Willson out of his trouble and give himself the firm base he was working for, it would be well worth the unpleasantness. Laroche drove him to St. John's Wood in the car.

The Baron's house proved to be a small, stone-

built villa, two-storied, standing in a large garden of its own, protected from the gaze of the curious by a high wall and a great thickness of chestnuts, laburnums, acacias, lilac and other tall bushes, now in full leaf and flower. At the front was a quiet lane, a blind alley, into which the only traffic was an occasional tradesman's cart or private vehicle. The villa was at the inner end of the lane. It gave the appearance of being untenanted, as though its owner were away and had shut up the house ; but of this it was difficult to be sure by a mere glance through the gateway in the stone wall, and Hallard did not care to lay open his hand by ringing the bell and asking for Baron Czernov, or by 'phoning to him. Until he knew something of the man he would have to scare, it would be futile to seek a direct interview.

Hallard withdrew, and sent Laroche to make discreet enquiries at a public-house in the neighbourhood. This was a meeting-place for coachmen, footmen and chauffeurs, and Laroche could mix with the habitués of the place in the freemasonry of his calling in a way which would have been impossible for Hallard. Laroche's command of English was limited, but so many Frenchmen are employed as chauffeurs in London that his nationality and halting language would be no great bar to obtaining the information needed. If he himself were asked questions, he was to say that his master was looking for a house in the district.

Having perfect confidence in Laroche's shrewdness and discretion, Hallard gave him the whole after-

noon to make enquiries, and returned home to await the result.

This turned out to be meagre and unsatisfactory. Baron Czernov and the Baroness did not keep a carriage or a motor-car—or, at all events, they did not keep one in St. John's Wood. Their small staff of servants were all foreigners, and at the moment the whole household was away. The villa was run very quietly and unobtrusively. No one at the public-house knew anything definite about the Baron and Baroness, though there were idle rumours in plenty, accompanied by suggestive winks and laughter.

The one point of importance was that the whole household was away.

That evening Hallard went alone to St. John's Wood and reconnoitred afresh. His idea was to burgle the empty villa in the hope of finding papers or data of some kind which could be employed against the Baron. A man who blackmails is invariably a man with a shady past. There would be quite a possibility of obtaining information of real value by ransacking the house.

To force an entrance by the front gate at the end of the blind alley did not seem a practicable plan. If a policeman on his rounds came along while an entrance or exit was being effected, the lane would prove a trap. Hallard rejected that idea and searched the neighbourhood for a more likely entrance to the villa.

During that search a fact of considerable moment came to light. There was a narrow passage at the

back of the villa, and in the high stone wall was a small, unobtrusive door. No doubt the Baron found it convenient occasionally to enter his house by this quiet passage, or to receive visitors in that way. There were marks of footprints around, more or less obliterated by dust. The door was, of course, locked. It might be possible to pick the lock. But a better suggestion offered itself to Hallard in the form of a chestnut-tree with branches overhanging the narrow passage. He could throw up a light rope and make an entrance via the tree.

This point settled, he returned to town and made his preparations for a raid that very night. After midnight the moon would be down and the weather conditions ideal. Laroche was to accompany him, in order to help in gaining an entrance and watch in the grounds while Hallard burgled the house. Both carried revolvers in case of accidents, and equally in case of accidents they carried them unloaded.

Renie, still unconvinced of the wisdom of getting mixed up in a blackmail case, made a last protest before they started off.

"Don't go," she urged. "It seems to me you've everything to lose and very little to gain."

"Suppose it came to the worst, and we were caught at the game by a policeman," argued Hallard. "What then? We're taken to court. I explain that I'm trying to help a friend who's being blackmailed. If the magistrate asks for it, I give young Willson's name in strict confidence. If there's one thing the English magistrates are down on more

than anything else, it's blackmail. My story would be all in my favour. A member of the Gresham Club is not a common burglar. The magistrate would pat me on the back, and the kudos I should get out of the case would be highly useful to us."

"*Je le garderai bien, madame,*" averred Laroche stoutly. He had implicit confidence in his master's judgment.

Renie, making the best of things, kissed her husband an affectionate good-night. "Well, good luck, *chéri*! Perhaps I'm just foolishly nervous. Tomorrow we'll have a good laugh over it all."

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### TRAPPED.

**S**HORTLY after midnight Hallard and Laroche arrived at the narrow passage back of the villa, and without difficulty climbed into the chestnut-tree and so into the grounds. The house, seen from the back through a tangle of bushes, was in darkness. Approaching nearer they found the windows shuttered and the kitchen door locked. No doubt the front door was also locked. Hallard decided to force an entrance by a kitchen window. He made a careful examination for the wires of a possible burglar alarm which might ring out and arouse the neighbourhood, and finding nothing suspicious, forced the catch of the window with a stout knife.

Laroche remained outside on guard while Hallard entered, flashing a small electric torch in order to see his way. The kitchen looked as though it had not been used for some time. That took away Hallard's last doubts, and without further pre-

caution he proceeded to search through the empty house.

Drawing-room and dining-room were expensively furnished in the rather flamboyant style; they offered no suggestion of hidden papers. In the study, or smoking-den, a big desk in inlaid rose-wood invited examination. Without troubling about noise, Hallard forced it open with an iron-worker's chisel, which served the purpose of the jemmy in a professional's outfit. He made a thorough search, but found nothing of value to him. Bills, receipts, a cheque-book, some private correspondence — these revealed nothing incriminating.

He went upstairs to the bedroom floor. Three rooms—evidently the bedrooms—beckoned to him. He chose one at the back, facing south, which would probably be the Baron's own room. Turning the handle boldly, he entered, his torch cutting a swath out of the darkness in front of him.

"Hands up, my friend!" commanded a foreign voice to one side of him, and at the same moment the electric light switched on with a sudden, violent blaze.

There was no time for Hallard to draw his own revolver. He had been taken completely by surprise. The Baron must have heard the noise he made in the house, and prepared for his coming upstairs to this shuttered and heavily-curtained bedroom.

Swiftly recognising the futility of attempting



fight at the present disadvantage, Hallard raised his hands and turned round with deliberate coolness.

This man confronting him with a sneer on his lips, this Baron Czernov, was an old acquaintance! He was Count Ratislaw—evidently continuing in his career of blackmailing.

“I will please trouble you for your revolver,” said the Count in his familiar silky voice.

Hallard silently reached down towards the side-pocket of his coat.

“No, I will take eet myself,” pursued the Austrian quickly, and did so. He then sat down on the bed, keeping his own weapon carefully pointed at Hallard.

“Tell me, my friend, what have you come here for?”

“You!” answered Hallard curtly.

It was the first word he had uttered. At hearing it, the Count started perceptibly and looked at his visitor with searching scrutiny. He remembered the voice, and though Hallard’s appearance was considerably altered from that of three years back, he penetrated the disguise.

“Eet ees indeed an old friend!” purred the Austrian. “Thees ees a pleasure! Please sit down. We will talk.”

Hallard was silently cursing himself for having overridden Renie’s advice. To be discovered in the act of burgling was bad enough, but it was far worse to be discovered by a man who had known him in his “Sir Ralph Kenrick” days, and would most undoubtedly take advantage of the knowledge.

Now, he had not only young Willson to defend against an unscrupulous blackmailer, but Renie and himself and Laroche as well.

It was damnable luck.

He sat down. "Talk away," he said, making his tone as indifferent as he could. It would be useless to deny his identity.

"No doubt you know that when a householder finds a burglar in hees house," continued the silky Austrian, "he can shoot, and the police will say, 'Bravo! Well done!' So I advise you to do just what I say and try no tricks. For then I shoot you dead."

Hallard knew that the Count meant it—he had a big grudge to clear off in that affair of the diamond necklace.

"Talk away," repeated Hallard, playing for time while he racked his wits for some way out of this dangerously tight corner.

"How did you come in?"

"By the kitchen window."

"And the little gate at the back?"

"No—over the back wall."

"You come for money—eh?"

"No."

"Then why?"

Hallard took a long chance. He knew how Count Ratislaw had managed to blackmail Major Eames on board the *Ariadne*. It was just possible that the Count had continued in the same groove. Anyway, a man does not hide himself away in his own house behind shuttered windows without

some shady reason for it. Hallard risked the long shot.

"I came for the plans," he returned crisply.

It went home. The Austrian sat rigidly still for a perceptible moment before he relaxed and replied easily: "A pretty tale."

"The Foreign Office sent me. If you shoot, you won't merely have a policeman after you, but the whole Foreign Office."

"You bluff me once, on the *Ariadne*. But not twice, my friend."

"The proof's simple enough. Down below this window is a secret service man. Look out and see. There's another waiting behind that back wall in the passage. There's a third behind the front wall. You're surrounded."

"You surround me when you do not know I am here!" retorted the Austrian ironically, fastening on the weak place in the argument.

"We didn't expect you back till the morning," replied Hallard instantly; "but we took good care there should be no interference from outside while I carried through this job. If you fire a shot, it's heard at once. There's a man under this window, as I told you."

Ratislaw hesitated for a moment. The point was provable. If he looked out, he could see whether Hallard were lying or not. But if he pulled back the curtains and the shutters it would expose the light in the room. If he first switched out the light, Hallard might risk a struggle in the darkness.

The solution of the difficulty was to gag and tie up Hallard.

The Count went to the chest of drawers, produced a pile of handkerchiefs, took a rope from round a trunk, and invited Hallard to be good enough to allow himself to be tied up. Resistance was obviously futile, since the only point that restrained the Austrian from shooting was a regard for his own personal safety.

The adventurer answered : " Just as you please," and let himself be gagged and trussed. There was no help for it. His life depended on his making the Austrian believe that he had to deal with an agent of the Foreign Office.

Hallard expected that Ratislaw would then switch out the light, make a survey through the window, see Laroche, and get nervous. But the Austrian did not do this. He turned off the light and left the room, taking Hallard's torch with him and shutting the door.

A long interval elapsed, so long that Hallard endured tortures of suspense in the wondering what was happening in that silent, shuttered house. The knots in the rope were skilfully tied and the gag was firm. All his efforts to wriggle loose had no more effect than to cut into the flesh. What was Laroche doing ? Would he have the sense to judge that something had gone wrong and enter the house to rescue his master ? But that could not be depended upon. Laroche was very loyal and very devoted to Hallard's interests, but he was not imaginative. Having been told to wait outside on

guard, he might wait there for an hour or more without stirring from his post.

When at length the Count returned, he switched on the light and stood regarding Hallard for a full minute in a silence that was at once triumphant and menacing. Then, for the pleasure of torturing his helpless adversary, the Austrian explained in smooth, silky tones just what he had been doing.

"You think me a fool. You think to bluff me twice. So I go to prove your pretty tale. I go to the kitchen window and I tap on eet and flash the torch. A man climbs in. I have in my hand a long bag full of sand that keeps the draught from the door. I go so"—he imitated a blow with a sand-bag—"and he crumples up and says nothing. Not a sound. So neat! Now *he* ees tied up, just like you. Then I go the back wall and look over to find your second man. Not there. I go to the front wall and look over to find your third man. Not there! It was a clever tale, my friend, but not clever enough. More—I recognise your friend who climbs in by the kitchen window. Laroche, ees eet not so?"

Never had Hallard felt so utterly sick with himself. Why hadn't he taken Renie's advice and kept clear of the affair? The gain was problematical in any case, and now——!

"What shall I do with you?" pursued the Austrian aloud. "Ah, I shall first search you."

He did so. He found Hallard's card-case, and surveyed the collection of "Captain Richard Masefield, Gresham Club," cards with a cynical smile.

He took out some letters and memoranda from the breast-pocket. These did not interest him. In another pocket he found young Willson's card with the address of the St. John's Wood villa written upon it. That interested him greatly. He studied it for a few moments, and then the right explanation came to him.

"Ah, now I see eet ! Our young friend Willson pays you to come here to search my house. You think I am away. Very pretty !"

Hallard began to lose hope. The Count now had the whole facts in his possession. He had Hallard at his mercy in that lonely, shuttered villa. Laroche was helpless. There was nothing to restrain the Count from murdering them both and then arranging their bodies so as to make it appear that they were burglars caught in the act of housebreaking and shot by him in self-defence.

Ratislaw made a last search into his adversary's clothes. This time he fished out an old, pocket-soiled card which Hallard had completely forgotten. It was one of Archie Fiennes', of the Foreign Office, with a message scribbled on it, "Must see you this afternoon about S and V." It dated back to the time when Hallard was Chamberlain to the Sultan of Bendorah, and Fiennes was courting his good offices for the purposes of gaining a diplomatic advantage.

This card made Ratislaw frown thoughtfully. He knew of Fiennes, and the confidential message on it troubled him. Was it possible that Hallard had some connection with the Foreign Office !

He fingered his revolver. Then he put it down, left the room, and returned with the sand-bag. It was perfectly clear to Hallard that the Count was considering which method of killing his adversary would be most capable of the explanation of homicide in defence of one's own home. He wanted to plan a neat and satisfactory murder.

At that moment the telephone bell at the Count's bedside rang out sharply.

Ratislaw started violently at the unexpected interruption. He dropped the sand-bag, and stood listening as though the continued ringing of the bell would somehow tell him who it was at the other end of the wire.

The bell went on with its insistent, petulant demand for some one to take up the receiver.

The Count moved softly to the bedside, took the receiver off its hook, and whispered :

“Hullo !”



## CHAPTER XXV.

### A TELEPHONE INSPIRATION.

**R**ENIE had been nervous and restless after the departure of her husband and Laroche.

The fear of some impending disaster made her feverishly sleepless. She tossed about in a half-dozing state punctuated by abrupt starts to full consciousness.

At about two o'clock she could stand the strain no longer, and went in her dressing-gown to Hallard's study to search for some book which might divert her thoughts. While she was looking for this, the telephone on the desk caught her eye, and the sudden idea came to her to look up the 'phone number of Baron Czernov's villa, and communicate with her husband, if he were there. A reassuring word from him, and she would go back to bed again with a relieved mind.

It was some time before the Exchange operators got her the connection.

Then a voice at the other end whispered :  
“Hullo !”

“Is that you, *chéri* ?” she asked.

“Who ees speaking ?” was the guarded answer.

Renie’s vague fears suddenly coalesced into poignant reality. The voice at the other end of the wire was not Hallard’s. Its slight foreign accent at once suggested Czernov. Nor was it the voice of a man aroused from sleep at two o’clock in the morning and impatient to know who was ringing up and why. On the contrary, the tone was reserved and secretive, as though the speaker were trying to learn as much as possible and give away nothing himself.

Something had gone wrong with the burglary scheme ! The villa was not untenanted. The Austrian was there. What had happened to Hallard ? Had he been surprised and overpowered ?

All these thoughts flashed through Renie’s mind in the second that elapsed before she replied : “This is Mrs. Masfield speaking. Call my husband to the ’phone, please.”

“You are making a meestake. You have the wrong number.”

“There’s no mistake,” returned Renie firmly. “My husband had an appointment at your house to-night. I have something urgent to tell him.”

There was no answer to this. But Renie knew that the man at the other end of the wire was listening, because she had heard no click such as follows the replacing of the receiver on the hook.

A man who listens and does not answer has some vital reason for so doing. What had happened at the villa ?

She continued with a firm decisiveness in her tone : “ *I must* speak to him at once ! The matter’s urgent. I’ll drive round in the motor. Expect me in five minutes’ time. Give him that message ! ”

She rang off ; rushed to her bedroom to throw on a travelling cloak over her dressing-gown and a lace wrap around her head ; and then with her bare feet in slippers she ran downstairs to the hall entrance to their flat and whistled furiously for a taxi.

The Hallards’ flat was off Sloane Street, a quarter of an hour’s drive by fast car from St. John’s Wood. Renie had said “ five minutes ” because the Austrian could not possibly know from how far away she was telephoning. She might be round the corner of the lane for all he could know to the contrary.

A prowling taxi speeded up to the door of the flat. Renie showed the man a sovereign as she hurriedly gave the St. John’s Wood address.

“ As fast as you can drive ! ” she ordered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hallard, gagged, trussed and helpless, saw a swift change in the Austrian as he stood listening in silence to the voice at the other end of the wire. Before the call came, he had had the air of a man with all the rest of the night in which to carry out his plans. Now he became furiously active,

unlocking trunks and thrusting papers into his pockets, gathering together money and watch and chain and hat and overcoat, as though he were preparing for a sudden journey.

That, indeed, was the case. Renie's inspired "five minutes" had upset all his plans for a leisured and careful murdering of Hallard and Laroche. At any moment he feared that a car might drive up to his door, and that Hallard's wife would not be alone in it. Perhaps she was bringing some one from the Foreign Office. He must hurry!

Ready for flight, the Austrian paused to whirl the sand bag and bring it down full upon Hallard's head; then he switched off the light, made his way out by the kitchen window, and fled by the little gate in the back wall.

Renie arrived at the front entrance to the villa some ten minutes after he had left. She had picked up a policeman on his beat near to the house, explaining that she feared a crime had taken place.

With the help of the chauffeur, the policeman forced an entrance by the front gate, and at the rear of the villa quickly discovered that some one had been entering and leaving by the kitchen window. The two men went in; found Laroche lying trussed and gagged in the study, and Hallard in the bedroom above, unconscious.

\* \* \* \* \*

With Hallard it was concussion of the brain. Six weeks passed before he was fit to be up and

about. Renie nursed him devotedly night and day through his delirium, because it was imperative that no outside person should hear revelations that came to the surface while his mind wandered amongst the adventures of the past years.

Young Willson was, of course, told of the affair, and was immensely concerned for Hallard's welfare. But at the end of the six weeks, when Hallard was up from his sick-bed, the young fellow had changed to an attitude of cold aloofness.

Hallard, very naturally incensed at this ingratitude, demanded the reason for Willson's change of manner towards him.

After repeated pressing, it came out. The Austrian, pursuing his blackmail from the safety of the other side of the Channel, had written that "Captain Masefield" was an alias for "Sir Ralph Kenrick," and that the man was wanted by the Continental police for numerous frauds.

"And you believe him?" asked Hallard.

"I don't know what to believe," was the weak-fibred answer. "I don't know whom to trust. Everyone's trying to do me down!"

"I suppose you don't even credit me with trying to rescue you from this blackmailing devil?"

"I don't know what to believe. I'm sick of everything! I've a good mind to shoot myself and end it all!"

At the Gresham Club Hallard found more cold welcomes and suspicious glances. Evidently young Willson had passed on the news that "Captain Richard Masefield" was an impostor.

“ Renie, dear,” said Hallard to his wife. “ You were infernally right when you told me not to meddle with a blackmail case. All I’ve got out of it is a cracked skull and London barred to me. We have to clear out of England. The sooner we go, the better for us.”

“ We can still be together,” answered Renie gently. “ Does anything matter to us more than that ? ”

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### AMERICA'S BACK DOOR.

THEIR capital, apart from Laroche's own money, was now standing roughly at sixteen thousand pounds. A slender basis on which to secure the hundred thousand pounds that Hallard had fixed in his mind as a retiring competence. Even a small addition to the basis would be welcome.

"This is the first time we're crossing the Atlantic," mused Hallard. "We're not known over there. No one would suspect us there for more than ordinary tourists. So it seems a waste not to combine our first visit with a little gentle smuggling."

"An excellent idea," agreed Renie. "But what shall we smuggle?"

"Uncut jewels are always worth their money in Europe, and more in New York, I'm told."

"I know that the American secret service agents keep in touch with the jewellers in Paris, London, and Amsterdam, in order to hear of any big parcels of stones sold to people travelling to the States."



"Ours won't be a big parcel."

"How much do you think of buying?"

"Say fifteen thousand pounds' worth. Of course, I'll leave the choosing of them to you."

Renie thoughtfully nodded assent. It was risking almost their entire capital, in view of possible detection and confiscation; but she realised that they must now make money very quickly, before their dubious reputation became widely known.

"What name are we to travel under?" she asked.

It sounds a very simple matter to take an alias, yet this is one of the big difficulties in the career of an adventurer such as Hallard. There is always the imminent possibility of some one penetrating an alias—at the steamship company, the hotels, on board ship, or where not—and the fact of hiding one's name at once suggests a criminal intention. After considerable discussion of pros and cons, Hallard and Renie decided that they must keep to "Masfield" as a travelling name.

"And when we buy the stones?" pursued Renie.

"Also Masfield. But fifteen thousand pounds' worth is a very small parcel. No need to fear the American secret service."

"Still, we ought to take precautions."

"I'll think them out," he answered reassuringly.

"For one point, we'll enter the States by the back-door."

"What's that?"

"Boston. Only don't say so to a Bostonian."

We'll take passage in a small Leyland liner, quiet and inexpensive, and enter pussy-footed."

Before booking their passage, Hallard and Renie spent the better part of a week in Hatton Garden offices, inspecting uncut stones, making a careful choice of jewels which would be easily saleable, and buying from several different firms.

"Would you care to have these set?" asked one of the dealers.

"Not at present," answered Hallard easily. "Want to lock them up as an investment. In a few years' time they ought to be worth thirty per cent. more."

Nevertheless, the dealer, as a matter of routine, notified a friend of his in the American secret service that a Captain Richard Masefield had bought a small parcel of uncut rubies; and the service agent, also as a matter of routine, sent a note of the transaction to the U.S. Customs Department.

\* \* \* \* \*

The voyage across was quiet and uneventful. The Leyland boats, primarily for cargo, take a leisurely ten days between Liverpool and Boston, and carry only one class of passengers. There is none of the super-luxury of the monster mail-boats; none of the fevered, throbbing rush to scrape a couple of hours off the record time; the atmosphere of the Leyland boat is quiet and homely and restful.

To Renie the change from their usual life of extravagant hothouse luxury was particularly grateful. The strain of the career of adventure had been telling on her. The débâcle of Rovecq, the

recognition by the Austrian, the feeling that anyone in English society circles might be penetrating their secret and knowing them for what they were, had been rasping at her nerves, though she had allowed no word of this to slip through to her husband. He would need all the help she could give him—active or passive—until he had gathered in the competence which was their immediate goal. The quiet voyage across was a form of rest-cure for Renie. She relaxed into simple dress—yachting sweater and tam-o'-shanter and heelless shoes ; gave no thought to her usually elaborate evening toilette ; knitted, made friends with the children on board. One family in particular claimed her—the little daughters of an American missionary, born and bred in the interior of Persia. They had recently lost their mother, and Renie mothered them as though they had been her own.

On the morning of the tenth day the white stump of Boston Light showed straight ahead, marking the end of this bar of rest in the fantasia of adventure. A gently-rocking pilot boat awaited them with pilot and immigration officials. As the ship threaded her way through the archipelago of Boston Harbour, a formal examination was made of the health and financial resources of the passengers. These were not "immigrants" in the usual sense of the word, and the testing was accordingly superficial and rapidly carried through.

Quietly and smoothly, with the help of a single tug, the ship swung into her appointed berth at the East Boston Docks, and the passengers' baggage

was derricked ashore for the customs examination and ranged under alphabetical letters for easy finding.

Captain Richard Masefield, in trim-cut, blue serge suit and Homburg hat, waited with his wife and chauffeur under the letter "M."

A customs officer approached, refreshing his memory from a notebook.

"Anything to declare—wearing apparel over the value of two hundred dollars; jewels, spirits, perfume, lace?" he asked.

"I expect our clothes are worth a trifle more than that," answered Hallard easily. "And there's my wife's jewellery."

"Turn them out, please." The official's tone was amiable and polite, for Boston has a reputation to keep up in respect of manners.

Hallard and Renie showed clothes and some trifles of personal jewellery, of which notes were made by the official.

"Nothing more—no other jewels?" he asked.

"Nothing more."

"And you, madam?"

"Nothing else."

"And your chauffeur?" turning to Laroche.

"Nothing, sir," answered the latter.

The official eyed them doubtfully, and then began a most detailed and systematic search into the effects, feeling into every pocket, tapping boots and shoes, testing the trunks for false bottoms.

"That hand-bag of yours, madam?"

Renie hesitated for a perceptible moment.

"Pass it to me," demanded the official.

"But——"

"Pass it to me!"

"Ah!" he exclaimed as he produced from the recesses a small paper parcel, and opened it to display a glitter of blood-red stones. "What's this?"

"Those are only imitation rubies," protested Hallard.

"Imitation—are they?" was the ironical answer. "We've had information of these. You can accompany me to the chief's office."

"I was told that imitation stones don't have to pay duty."

"This way!"

In the office of the chief, Hallard repeated his explanation with considerable heatedness.

"You were misinformed," was the cold official answer. "These stones were not declared—therefore they are confiscated."

"I'll appeal against that! I'll get a lawyer to take up my case!"

The chief passed him a Boston directory. "Find your lawyer and 'phone him up."

Angrily, Hallard did so.

"And now," said the chief, "you can pay duty on your other items and go. You'll never see those rubies again." He swept them into a drawer of his desk and locked it.

\* \* \* \* \*

The statement was correct. They were confiscated beyond hope of recovery.

But they were, as Hallard had protested, imitations—of trifling value. He had bought them for the exact purpose of giving the customs authorities an easy capture.

The real rubies were elsewhere, inside the lining of his Homburg hat.

And a month or so later, in New York, he disposed of them for a comfortable twenty thousand pounds.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### BUCKING NEW YORK.

“**L**ET’S give New York a new luxury,” suggested Hallard dreamily.

“You might as well try to gild gold paint,” answered the practical Renie.

They had been three months in the States—at New York, Newport, Atlantic City, Washington, and New York again—looking for an opportunity of planting one of Hallard’s typically audacious schemes. The adventurer had made plenty of acquaintances, thanks to his pleasant personality, but no likely opening for a money-making scheme had yet presented itself. Now, installed in a highly expensive suite in the very newest caravanserai, he was endeavouring to hatch some idea which would plug the rapid drain on their limited capital.

He continued with philosophic detachment: “What’s New York? The world’s quickest spending-place. What’s the ambition of the all-



wool and spiral-tailored New Yorker? To make a spending-splash. What's a new luxury? Any old thing at treble the old price."

"In a fancy wrapper," added Renie, now entering into the spirit of her husband's reflections.

"Exactly. If a man starts to sell chocolates on Broadway at half a dollar a pound, no self-respecting New Yorker would be seen entering his shop. If he puts up the same chocolates in an art wrapper, charges two dollars a pound, and advertises broadcast that no chocolate leaves his shop under two dollars a pound, he makes a fortune. The way to gild gold paint, my dear Renie, is to add a couple of hundred per cent. to the price of it. Then people think it looks goldier."

"Have you hit on a business scheme this time?"

"Yes. No. I haven't the temperament to make money in trade. Trade's too tame for me. But if I could convince some keen business man——"

"What's your idea?"

"This. Paris in New York."

"But one can get that on the lower East Side," objected Renie.

"Exactly. Cheap French restaurants on lower Second Avenue. Move the same thing into the fashionable district, put it into an art wrapper, charge five times the prices, and you make a fortune." His tone changed from the philosophic to the enthusiastic. "I'd have a great hotel run entirely on French lines! All employees specially

imported from Paris. Sacked at a moment's notice if they speak anything but French to the guests ! French service, French breakfasts, French dinners ; French barbers and manicures and milliners and jewellers installed on the ground floor. The only thing American about the whole show would be the prices, and they would make even the New Yorker look scared ! ”

“ It's a good scheme,” said Renie, “ but——”

“ What's the but ? ”

“ It isn't one of *your* schemes. How would *you* make money out of it ? ”

“ That depends on the man I manage to interest. I can't make money out of trade, but I can make money out of men.”

Renie nodded an emphatic assent. “ I should go straight ahead with it,” said she.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bruce Quilter, of the firm of Quilter, Schemmerhorn and Eaton, was a busy New Yorker. When Hallard was shown into his private office at the Bankers' Trust Building on Wall Street one morning at nine-thirty, he found Quilter lying back in his swivel chair with a towel round his neck, being shaved by his confidential barber. A big cigar stood out from a sea of lather. A secretary was handing him papers on which to scribble his signature with his right hand. His left hand he extended to Hallard with great cordiality. Through the side of his mouth not occupied with the cigar he explained hospitably :

"Shan't be a moment. Sit down and take a smoke." He indicated a cigar-box.

The swift removal of the lather under the barber's deft strokes revealed a broad, well-fed, ruddy face. Above were shrewd, wide-awake eyes. His fair hair was curly and abundant and only slightly touched with grey at the temples. A prosperous business man, making money easily and spending it easily—that was the impression he gave.

The barber dusted his client's face with talc powder, gathered up his tools, and departed. The secretary withdrew to a desk at a far corner of the room, and began to tap away at his typewriter with a lightning touch.

Quilter turned to Hallard—who still moved under his alias of "Captain Richard Masefield"—and plunged straight into the subject of the interview—"Billy tells me you've got some big scheme to put up. Fire away!"

Hallard put together concisely the idea he had developed to Renie. Quilter, quick at the up-take, nodded rapidly at each of Hallard's pauses. The scheme "hit him in the eye"—already he was looking ahead and grappling with the financial end.

He asked a number of shrewd and pointed questions, and then approached the subject of Hallard's qualifications for helping in the plan

"Are you a hotel man?"

"No."

"Ever managed a business?"

"No."

"Then where do you fit in?"

"I know Europe and European ways, through and through."

"So do heaps of men."

"I've thought out the arrangement end to the last detail, and I can give you scores of pointers. I want an advisory post, and of course an interest in the profits."

"Yes—but what are you offering me?"

"This scheme."

"It was put up to me six months ago, in very much the same form. I'm already dickering for a site for the hotel."

The way of the inventor is always a thorny one. Even when he can protect his idea by a patent it is difficult to make money out of it. When his idea is not patentable, his chance is slender indeed. Hallard was not taken in by the excuse of "put up to me six months ago," but he could not give the lie to it.

He replied: "I haven't yet told you the keynote to my plan."

Quilter put up a warning hand. "Don't tell me it! I'd rather you keep it to yourself." He had, in fact, heard quite sufficient to serve his purpose. "So far you've only told me old stuff."

"Then I'm pushed out?" asked Hallard bluntly.

"Not at all! I'd like to have a call on your advisory services. You ask for an interest in the scheme. I'll put up the matter to my partners, and let you know just what we can offer you."

He reached out his hand and shook Hallard's with great cordiality. "I'll do my best for you—sure!"

Hallard knew that he was being twiddled round Quilter's little finger. They would make him some indefinite promise in order to keep him quiet until the scheme was in full swing. Then he would be firmly put aside, with perhaps a couple of thousand dollars as a sop to conscience.

Hallard did not belong to the "patient Griselda" class of inventor. All his fighting instincts were roused, and for three days he was mostly a haze of tobacco smoke. Renie could hardly drag him to meals or induce him to go to bed.

Let no one imagine that the crook's calling is an easy one. Apart from the risks and dangers in action, the think-work involved in a modern type of big-money scheme is amazing. The plan itself has to be original and plausible, simple in theme under its complexity of execution. Scores of practical difficulties have to be foreseen and circumvented.

In this particular case, Hallard was greatly hampered by his limited capital. At the present moment he had only twenty thousand pounds in hand.

He might try to discover what site for the hotel Quilter and his partners would fix upon, and then gamble his money on buying an option on that land. Such a plan looked very rickety. Even could he discover the site they were choosing, his knowledge of Manhattan real estate values

was infantile compared with Quilter's, and his option on the land might prove valueless.

Or he might try to work a Stock Exchange gamble in the shares of the company they would probably float. In this he would be pitted against three shrewd Wall Street men who knew the market fifty times better than he did, and in any case could fight him with fifty times his own capital.

The problem was looking absolutely hopeless, when there suddenly flashed on his mind a piece of knowledge he had stored away many years ago. At a scientific lecture at the Royal Institution in London which Hallard had attended by sheer chance, a slight accident had happened. The professor who was lecturing had incidentally to demonstrate the peculiar properties of nitrogen iodide. He had dipped a piece of paper into the solution, and left it to dry. Gesturing unconsciously his hand touched the paper, and in a flash the paper had exploded and vanished into fragments. The audience had roared with laughter at the professor's nervous jump and consequent upsetting of a whole train of elaborate glassware apparatus.

Hallard suddenly recollected that trivial incident. But nitrogen iodide was too tricky a chemical for any purpose of his. Unless one could tame it!

He hurried out, and returned laden with samples of every dissolving liquid he could buy in New York. For three days more he buried himself in the problem of taming nitrogen iodide, while Renie with marvellous patience endured the excruciating

mixture of odours he was creating, and fended off enquiries from pert chambermaids and impudent bell-hops.

At the end of three days, Hallard had conquered his problem. He Turkish-bathed himself free of odours, and went to call at the Bankers' Trust Building. Quilter expressed himself delighted to see Hallard.

"I've talked matters over with my partners," he said. "I've told them I'd like to have you work in with us, and I've persuaded them to agree with me. Come along and I'll introduce you to Freddy Eaton. He'll fix up details with you."

They went to an adjoining room occupied by the junior partner of the firm of Quilter, Schemmerhorn and Eaton.

Freddy was also a busy New Yorker. He looked startlingly young—from the European standpoint. He might almost be fresh from the college band-box. Yet he was already known as a daring raider on stock pools, and had landed some heavy fish therefrom. He was as keen as a ferret, as nervy as a trick aviator, and as nimble as a grasshopper. He had begun a career of success by choosing a set of rich but not indulgent parents, and no doubt he would lever himself eventually into the multi-mill class.

When Hallard was taken into his office, about two-thirty in the afternoon, Eaton was in his shirt-sleeves, conducting a telephone conversation with the Exchange and signing letters simultaneously.



Slamming up the receiver, he greeted Hallard as cordially as though the latter were a long-lost millionaire uncle.

Presently he slipped into his coat, gave a rapid fire of orders to a freckly stenographer whom he addressed as "Jennie," passed her a couple of theatre stall tickets as a return for doing extra work, and linked his arm affectionately into Hallard's. "I'm off to the Polo Ground. Come right along with me and see the Giants munch beans." (It developed that the Giants were a baseball team representing New York, and now engaged in contesting with a team from Boston a set of games known magniloquently as a "World's Series.") "We can talk business in the car or between innings."

As Freddy's car whisked up the narrow canyon of Nassau Street into Center Street and past the gloomy prison of the Tombs, and so eventually into the broad freedom of Fourth Avenue, scattering pedestrians with a motor-horn which imitated very realistically the squeal of a slaughtered hog, the young fellow talked a delightful mingle of baseball and business. Disentangling, it amounted to this :

"We'd like to have you in with us to advise on the Parisian frillings. We'd be ready to pay you at the rate of five thousand dollars a year——"

("For as long as the post lasted—which might be a couple of months," thought Hallard.)

"——and we'd let you have stock in the concern at ninety cents on the dollar. The public will take

stock at par or near. How much would you think of chipping in? "

This was a neat way of asking for money in the light of granting a favour. Hallard replied easily: "I'd like to have money in it. I think I could put up half a million dollars."

"Your own? "

"My wife's."

"Couldn't you round up another half a million amongst your friends in England? " enquired Freddy Eaton, as though the amount were an every-day trifle.

Hallard smiled good-humouredly. "London doesn't do business in the rapid way you work over here," he explained.

During a breathing interval in the baseball game Freddy asked: "Can your wife meet me for dinner to-night? Say Rector's."

The pace was getting too hot for Hallard, accustomed though he was to rapid thought and action. So he answered: "We're fixed for to-night. To-morrow night's free, I think. I'll ask my wife."

"What's that keystone to the plan you were speaking about? " enquired the young fellow ten minutes later, the interval being devoted to the game.

"Entertainment hall for Grand Guignol playlets Twelve-minute thrillers—d'you know the kind? Woman murdered in studio and cased up in sculptor's plaster, and then haunting the place—that sort of thing."

"Run, you spavined tortoise!" shouted Eaton to a player who seemed to Hallard to be streaking round the diamond. "For the love of Mike, don't stop to pick daisies!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Renie, on hearing of the proposed dinner with Freddy Eaton, instantly put it off for three days.

"Why?" asked her husband. "We can get our tale fixed up by to-morrow night."

Renie smiled indulgently at this masculine denseness as she answered: "But how can I get a new gown fixed up by to-morrow night?"

"Is it to be a dazzler?"

"A rocket display," replied Renie, and outlined a maze of technical detail.

It certainly was a "dazzler" when she entered Rector's on her husband's arm. A trifle more, and it would have been outrageous. But Renie's French blood gave her the intuitive knowledge of just how to stop on the very brink of dazzling disaster. It impressed Freddy, who could discriminate the *chic* from the too-too. He was still more impressed when, towards the end of the dinner, she slipped in a reference to her godfather, the Marquis de Mas d'Aloriac.

"I seem to know the name," said Freddy.

"He's a dear," continued Renie. "Whenever I've wanted money, he's never failed me. I'm going to get him to give me this half-million dollars to put into your company."

"Where is he now?"

"In England. I'm going to write and tell him

all about the scheme. Where do you think of erecting the hotel ? ”

Freddy had drunk wine freely, but it did not interfere with his business sense, which he kept in a wine-tight compartment. He was the firm's entertainment specialist. He replied readily : “ We're dickering for a site on Forty-Second Street.” It was not likely that he would tell them the real site in view—an exceptional position on Fifth Avenue near to the Grand Central Terminal.

“ Are the plans ready yet ? ” continued Renie.

“ The architect is working on them day and night.”

“ I'd like to see them.”

“ Sure ! As soon as they're ready, I'll bring them along to you.”

“ When are you going to float the company ? ”

“ It's incorporated already. When will you have this half-million dollars ? ”

“ I'll write this mail.”

“ Then you ought to have it inside a fortnight.”

“ Yes. I'm quite sure my godfather will send me the money.”

“ It'll be the best investment you ever made in your life ! ” answered Freddy with impressive conviction.

“ I've such confidence in you,” returned Renie with a dazzling smile. “ You're quite a boy, and yet you look so experienced and so clever.”

For one instant the young fellow had the quixotic impulse to warn her to keep her money out of the company. The hotel would be built sure enough,

and would go on to eventual success ; the promoters would make big profits ; but the outsider shareholders would have a troublous time. The next moment he was himself again. After all, she had a husband to advise her, and if Captain Masfield liked to play the goat with his wife's money, that was their funeral.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE INVISIBLE DRAFT.

L AROCHE went to England by the next boat. He took with him nineteen thousand pounds and expense money. In England, he was to write letters to Renie in the name of Marquis de Mas d'Aloriac. He had also very specific instructions as to what to do with the nineteen thousand pounds.

In a little over the fortnight came the answer from the Marquis, written on very aristocratic note-paper in a crabbed old-fashioned hand. Renie showed it to Eaton. The letter expressed pleasure at having a focus of French life implanted in New York, but before sending the money asked for, the marquis wished to be sure that the hotel would be run on Royalist and not on Republican lines.

"He's a dear," explained Renie; "but that's his particular crankiness."

Eaton was annoyed at the delay. His firm had been keeping back the actual flotation of the

company until they had Renie's half-million dollars safely in hand as a nucleus. They could not put off the flotation for another fortnight. However, he disguised his annoyance and told Renie to promise the Marquis that they would respect his wishes.

"In fact, we'll sanctify one room to the Royalist cause. Put up busts of the whole Bourbon crowd, and run it as a Royalist club."

"I'll write at once," said Renie, and did so.

On receiving her letter, Laroche waited until a quarter to twelve on a Saturday morning, and at that precise hour entered the head office of the London and Westminster Bank to buy a draft on New York for nineteen thousand pounds. A draft is the safest and most usual form of transmitting money across the ocean. The bank took his nineteen thousand pounds, and in return handed him two orders for cash on the City National Bank of New York—one with the overprint "Original" and the other with the overprint "Duplicate." The business custom is to send one and keep back the other, in case of loss by accident or by shipwreck. At the same time the London and Westminster Bank would write an advice note to the City National Bank of New York, telling them to cash the draft.

The bank clerk gave Laroche his two copies of the draft, but remarked, "You're too late for to-day's mail. The boat-train with the last mail leaves for Southampton at twelve o'clock."

Laroche clicked annoyance. "When will be ze nex' boat?" he asked in his broken English.



"Thursday. Our advice note will go by Thursday's boat."

Laroche had a fast car ready waiting for the precise purpose of speeding to Southampton and getting his letter on board at the last moment. Disregarding speed limits, he scorched for Southampton and succeeded in posting his letter containing the copy of the draft marked "Original." The wording on it ran: "Pay to the order of Captain Richard Masefield nineteen thousand pounds sterling or equivalent—£19,000--0--0."

The precious letter arrived safely in New York five days ahead of the bank's advice note. Hallard then got busy with it. When he had finished his penwork, it read: "Pay to the order of Captain Richard Masefield ninety thousand pounds sterling or equivalent—£90,000--0--0."

It was of course a forgery, and punishable by ten years or so of prison, if presented at the City National Bank and cashed for £90,000.

He then 'phoned up Freddy Eaton at the Bankers' Trust Building.

"We've got the letter from the Marquis," said Hallard.

"Has he sent you the money?"

"Yes—a draft on the City National. But it's made out to myself instead of my wife. Does that matter? Of course, I want the stock to be in her name. The money was intended for her, but I expect the old chap thought it safer to make it out to myself."

"That's all right," answered Freddy. "Bring

along the draft and I'll hand over the stock. It's bearer stock, so it doesn't matter who takes it."

"We're doing a theatre matinée this afternoon. Could we see you at your office after the theatre—say at six o'clock?"

Eaton was anxious to have the money as early as possible. He had agreed to sell stock to Hallard at the price of ninety, and in order to make this seem a profitable transaction for Hallard, the firm were buoying up the stock of the company on the Exchange at the price of ninety-five until the Marquis' money was safely in their possession. Then they would let go and allow the stock to tumble to its natural level.

Being anxious to get the money, Eaton readily agreed to staying an extra half-hour at his office.

"Sure!" he answered. "Expect you at six."

At six o'clock clerks and stenographers were streaming out of the Bankers' Trust Building and the other monster skyscrapers of the Wall Street district. Nassau Street and Broadway were gorged with human beings scurrying and jostling in the nightly race for subway and surface and elevated cars. Principals had mostly left their offices some time before the congested rush-hour. Quilter and Schemmerhorn were already away, leaving the closing of the transaction in the capable hands of the junior partner.

Hallard and Renie were solitary passengers in an up-shooting elevator. A brief glance exchanged between them gave the only sign of the acute anxiety each was feeling. The critical moment of the scheme

was approaching. Hallard had risked forgery and its penalties in this gamble for a ninety thousand pound stake. Would the forged draft pass Eaton's keen eyes? And then, beyond that, if it passed, would the rest of the daring plan go through to success?

Freddy Eaton greeted them with great cordiality, and immediately suggested taking them to dinner and a cabaret show that evening. Renie accepted with a gracious smile.

Then the stock to the nominal value of half a million dollars was produced on the one side; the draft on the other; while the freckly stenographer, impatient at being kept late, stood by as witness to the formalities.

Eaton took the draft and examined it keenly.

"Did you drop this into water somehow?" he asked.

"A fool chambermaid upset a medicine-bottle over my writing-desk," answered Hallard easily.

"It seems in order. Will you endorse it?"

Hallard did so, and handed it back.

"I'll pass it through the Bank to-morrow," continued Eaton, and started to pocket it.

"Hadn't you better put it in your safe?" suggested Hallard. "*I* shouldn't care to carry that amount with me in New York at night-time."

Freddy laughed, and went to his safe in a corner of the room, turning the combination with a practised hand. Then, with the precious slip of paper safely put away, he handed the half-million of stock

to Hallard, dismissed the impatient stenographer, and drove his guests to their hotel to change for dinner.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning, on arrival at his office, Eaton went to his safe and opened it in order to take the draft and cash it at the City National Bank.

The slip of paper had vanished.

He searched in vain ; hunted through his pockets and his desk ; searched the safe once more ; then called in the freckly stenographer.

" Jennie, where did I put that draft last night ? "

" In the safe."

" Well, it isn't there."

" D'you think I took it ? " asked Jennie indignantly.

" I'm trying to find out where it is."

" You can search *me* ! " retorted the girl, speaking of course in a purely metaphorical sense.

" You say you saw me put it into the safe at six o'clock last night ? "

" Yes."

" You saw me lock the safe ? "

" Yes."

" You arrived here first this morning ? "

Jennie replied to this by walking to the hat-stand and taking up her coat and hat. " Frederick Howard Eaton," said she with elaborate dignity, " I guess you're getting too fresh for me. Find another stenographer ! "

But Eaton did not care to lose her and have the

trouble of breaking another secretary into his ways. He managed to pacify her outraged feelings with the promise of a rise in salary ; then hurried to the City National Bank, only a hundred yards distant down Wall Street, where he explained that a draft for ninety thousand pounds drawn by the London and Westminster Bank had been stolen from him. Had it been presented to them ?

The answer was no.

That was a big relief. He then asked if they had the usual advice note from London.

The answer was no—probably it would arrive by the next incoming mail.

Eaton jumped in a taxi and was whisked up to Hallard's hotel.

" Sorry to trouble you," he explained tersely, " but that draft you gave me last night has got mislaid somehow or other."

" Mislaid ! " exclaimed Hallard.

" Yes—or stolen. I don't know which. Anyhow, it's not in the safe where you saw me put it last night."

Hallard could have told him one or two facts about the properties of nitrogen iodide as applied in solution to a slip of paper and left all night to its own devices, but he refrained. Instead, he answered :

" I hope you've stopped the draft at the City National, in case anybody else should present it."

" Sure."

" Then you're quite safe. No one else can claim the money," said Hallard cheerily.

"I know. But I want the duplicate of the draft. Have you got it?"

"No—the Marquis only sent me the original."

"Well, d'you mind cabling over and asking him to send the duplicate."

"With pleasure, old man! Come along with me now and I'll send the cable. I'll prepay the answer, so that the Marquis can reply and tell us when he's posting the duplicate."

In the course of the day Eaton's anxieties were relieved by a return cable from the Marquis de Mas d'Aloriac. The message stated that the duplicate would be sent at once, addressed to Eaton's office. The young fellow was still mightily perturbed by the puzzle of how the draft could have disappeared from a locked safe of which the combination was known only to himself; but it was comforting to hear that the duplicate, equally cashable at the City National Bank, would be across the ocean in a week.

Being a young man of self-confidence, he made no mention of the affair to Quilter or Schemmerhorn. He waited.

\* \* \* \* \*

But Hallard and Renie did not wait.

They sold their half-million dollars' worth of stock through an Exchange broker for what it would fetch for cash. They received roughly £89,000 for it. That same day they cleared out from New York and the United States for good. They left Freddy Eaton waiting for a duplicate draft which never arrived.

When that shrewd young man discovered that he had been tricked, he made no open lamentation. He said nothing to his partners. He kept his reputation for business acuteness intact by replacing the ninety thousand pounds out of his own pocket.

In his private ledger, he charged it up to "Experience with Crooks."



## CHAPTER XXIX.

### TO SETTLE DOWN!

ON the liner cleaving its way across the Atlantic from New York to Naples, Hallard and Renie conferred very seriously over their future life-plan.

They had now acquired money sufficient for moderate needs—a capital of nearly ninety thousand pounds. They could invest it in sober, sound securities and live very comfortably on the interest. But money was by no means the only factor in the situation. There was the past to reckon with—the cumulative past of a crook's career. Anywhere in Europe or the States, Hallard might run up against people who knew him personally or knew his past record. France was barred to him. Italy was no safe ground. London they had to leave only a few months back. New York they had just slipped away from in very necessary haste.

In the privacy of their state-room, Hallard

unfolded a map of the world and handed it to his wife.

"I leave it to you, partner," said he.

Renie studied the map for a long time in silence. Then she took a pencil, drew a deliberate line across the equator, and blacked out the northern hemisphere.

"For a couple of years, at all events," she suggested.

"Agreed," returned Hallard. "But where shall we travel in the meantime? South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, South America, the South Sea Islands?"

"I want to settle down," said Renie, and in her voice was the pent-up feeling of many years. "*Chéri*, I want a home of our own. Our own possessions around us; a garden to dig and plant and care for; a circle of friends; a feeling of rest and peace; no more plotting and scheming—just a home and rest."

"It's been rough on you to be the wife of a crook," answered Hallard, deeply moved. "I've had the excitement of adventure, and Laroche, too, but you—you've had to bear the anxiety of it all."

"I don't regret it. I've never regretted it. But now that we have the money, after all these years of scheming, I *would* like to settle quietly in a home of our own."

"So you shall."

After some further discussion, they chose Australia for the new home. Melbourne and Sydney were both large cities offering the comforts of civilisation

to which they had grown accustomed. Renie did not wish to bury herself in the back-blocks. She proposed that they should visit Melbourne and Sydney, and settle down in one of the two. They would buy a house and grounds in a good suburb, within touch of the life of the city and yet far enough away to give them the peacefulness of the country. That would be the ideal life-plan.

Hallard sent a message by wireless to Laroche in London to meet them at Naples on the arrival of the liner. From Naples they could catch a mail-boat to Australia. Once there, they would start a fresh existence.

\* \* \* \* \*

A week later, Hallard and Renie and Laroche were on board the Orient liner *Oroya* in the Bay of Naples. Steam was curling upwards from her funnels. She was only awaiting the arrival of the express from Calais before hoisting anchor. This boat-train would bring her a considerable influx of passengers from England, including a team of cricketers going out to wrest "the ashes" from the grasp of Australia.

It was sunset. The sun had dipped beneath the Western waters in a cloudless glory of opal and ash-of-roses. The lower slopes of Vesuvius were already a cold, deep purple, but above, the crater was clothed in cloth-of-gold. The peace of eventide was over all.

Renie's hand stole out and met her husband's as they stood together by the bulwarks.

"The beginning of our new life," she whispered as she pressed his hand.

"And a happy omen for it!" was his fervent answer.

A bugler came along the deck blowing the first call to dinner—that call which travels round the whole world with the sinking sun from the decks of British liners. They went below to change.

Halfway through dinner there came the noise of bustle on the decks above them. A tender was alongside, bringing the passengers from the Calais express and their piles of baggage. They could hear the trunks being dumped into the hold. Presently the tender departed; the donkey-engines got to work on the hoisting of the anchor; the siren boomed its farewell blast, rattling the dishes and jarring the framework of the liner from end to end; the engines gripped hold of the propeller shaft and started their rhythmic thud.

As Renie and Hallard left the dining-room, a group of athletic-looking men passed them going in to a late dinner. These would be the cricket team. Suddenly Renie felt her husband stiffen beside her. She turned to him, saw his glance fixed on one of the men, and followed it.

"It's Claude Lambert!" she whispered.

"D——!" muttered Hallard.

If the fellow should recognise them, it would create a very awkward situation. Lambert had known them as "Sir Ralph and Lady Kenrick." Now they travelled as "Captain and Mrs. Richard Masefield." An alias always implies some good

reason for concealment. If Lambert should recognise them, and tell others on board, the voyage would become socially impossible, and their new life in Australia would be handicapped from the start.

Renie and her husband went to a quiet part of the deck and conferred in whispers. It was too late to pack up and transfer to some other steamer. The *Oroya* was already under way and gathering speed ; Naples and its coast-line of villas were now a glow and twinkle of lights rapidly coalescing into a blur.

" Will he know us, do you think ? " asked Renie anxiously.

" Very probably he will. He might not know me alone, but both of us together, and Laroche also on board——"

" He may be ill and keep to his cabin."

" Only for a few days—along the Mediterranean. In the Canal and down the Red Sea it'll be smooth going. He's certain to be up on deck in a few days at latest."

" Suppose we drop off at Port Said and take another boat ? "

" Yes—that will be the best plan. We can tell the purser that we want to make a side excursion to Cairo, and travel on by next week's steamer."

But Lambert was not sea-sick. Early next morning he was tramping the deck with other members of his team, and making a preliminary survey of the ladies on board in order to choose a subject for a pleasant shipboard flirtation.

Renie suggested to her husband that they should keep to their cabin. But he did not agree. In the first place, one cannot plausibly feign seasickness; in the second place, he hated the idea of hiding away from this fellow whom he had fought and thrashed. It would be a poor beginning for the new life to skulk in a cabin for three or four days.

So they remained on deck, keeping aloof from fellow-passengers, and trusted to luck.

That very first day out, Claude Lambert, surveying the flirtation field, noted Renie lying in a *chaise longue* in a secluded part of the deck, reading a novel from the ship's library. At the moment Hallard was away, seeing the purser over the matter of disembarking at Port Said.

"Rather fetching!" was Lambert's comment to his companion. "Who is she?"

"Don't know."

"Married or widow, I wonder?"

"Married, I should say."

"I guess widow. Take a bet on it?"

A small bet was fixed up, and Lambert, who knew that his Apollo-like features and figure were irresistible to the other sex, separated from his companion and prepared himself for an approach. Board-ship convention allows one to strike up acquaintanceships on the very flimsiest form of introduction.

As he came near, loitering, waiting to find some slight excuse for starting a conversation, Renie happened to put down her book and glance up.

Their eyes met. Lambert half recognised her. He raised his cap and approached.

"Surely we've met before? Frankly, I've forgotten your name; but no one could forget *yourself*."

It was a very awkward moment for Renie. She met his eyes steadily and replied: "I think there must be some mistake on your part."

"I beg your pardon. A most striking resemblance. I thought for the moment you were a lady I once met. Her name was—let me think——"

He made no move to withdraw. Renie started to take up her book. Lambert continued:

"I can't get the name for the moment, but it doesn't matter. Glorious day, isn't it? Are you going to play for the ladies' cricket team?"

"No—I don't play cricket," was the cold reply.

"That's a pity. It'll be an awfully jolly match. Perhaps dancing's more in your line?"

At this moment Hallard came briskly along the deck to rejoin Renie. His eyes and Lambert's met. Again memory stirred inside the cricketer. He did not voice his thoughts, but raising his cap to Renie, he withdrew.

It was perhaps the slight annoyance of losing his half-crown over the "married or widow" bet that drove Lambert to cudgel his memory. At intervals during the day he kept looking surreptitiously at Renie and her husband. But it was not until dinner, when he saw the two in evening dress, that the puzzle-pieces in his recollection suddenly



fitted together and brought back to him a complete and vivid picture. Ascot week ; dinner-time at "Wellwood," the big dining-room, Sir Ralph and Lady Kenrick entering. Yes—that was it ! The man who had fought him in the stable over the thousand-pound black pearl pendant.

D—— him !

A list of passengers had been printed that day on the ship's press, and a copy was now lying before each diner's seat. Lambert glanced through his copy to find the names of Sir Ralph and Lady Kenrick. They were not on the list. He happened to be seated next to the purser, in one of the places of honour, and he called the latter's attention to the omission.

"There's no 'Sir Ralph Kenrick' on board," replied the purser.

"Then who's that man over at the table by the palm ?"

"Captain Masefield."

"And the lady with him ?"

"Mrs. Masefield."

Lambert whispered confidentially : "Then keep an eye on the spoons."

"I don't understand you."

"I knew that pair as Sir Ralph and Lady Kenrick. They're a shady lot."

The purser diplomatically turned the conversation to an impersonal topic. Lambert was not satisfied with his work. In the smoking-room after dinner he conveyed his news confidentially

to one man after another. By next morning the whole of the first-class had heard the story and were discussing it with zest. Hallard and Renie saw glances turned on them from every direction. A highly proper British matron seated next to them in the dining-saloon ostentatiously had her place changed to another table.

Lambert, fortified by the presence of two fellow-members of the cricket team, boldly approached Hallard on deck and began :

“Hullo, Kenrick ; thought I recognised you directly I got on board.”

Hallard knew by now that it would be useless to deny his identity. He slowly closed his fist and looked at it significantly before he replied : “ You have good reason for remembering me. The last time I saw you, you were lying on a stable floor and considering the question of buying a couple of new front teeth.”

The retort was an effective one, but it did not mend the general situation. He and Renie were now known by all on board to be travelling under an alias. Even if they changed to another Orient liner, at Melbourne or Sydney some of the passengers from the *Oroya* would be bound to run across them and spread the story of their shady record.

With reluctance Hallard said to Renie : “ We’d better give over the idea of Australia.”

“ Yes,” she agreed despondently. It was a bitter thought that at the very outset of their new life the past should be rising up to confront and

denounce. Were they never to settle in peace and quietude?

“ Suppose we turn aside and go to South Africa? I’ve heard that Cape Town is a fine city. Shall we make our home there? ”

“ Anywhere,” answered Renie.

They left the *Oroya* at Port Said.

## CHAPTER XXX.

### ARCADIA.

THE next Cape-bound liner, a D.O.A.L. boat, was not due for ten days. Apart from the disagreeables of a stay in the furnace-heat of Port Said, Hallard and Renie were anxious to avoid any further contact with saloon passengers, in any group of whom might be found some past enemy or dupe.

Coaling in harbour was a fine, sturdy tramp steamer flying the house-flag of Collinson and Co., of Bristol. Hallard learnt that she was bound for Mombasa, Zanzibar, and Durban. He and Renie went to interview the captain, asking for a passage to Durban, whence they could easily reach Cape Town.

Captain Datchett, a broad-built, ruddy-faced West countryman, looked dubiously at Renie. "'Tis no ship for a lady to travel on," he said. "We're plain folk. We bunk plain and we eat plain."

Renie smiled gaily at his doubts. "I'm tired of the *de luxe* life. I should just love simplicity."

"Maybe it would do you no harm for a couple of weeks. I've heard tell that doctors do recommend a plain life for society ladies," ruminated the captain with a kindly bluntness. "I could buy in some tinned tit-bits such as a lady would like. But you must not expect a purser and a doctor and a wireless man in uniform to give you your day's news and put it on your breakfast table like they do in the liners. Nor an orchestra neither."

Renie laughed heartily at his quaint idea of the necessities of a "society lady's" existence. "I am quite sure you would make me comfortable, and I should enjoy the change. May I see the cabin?"

"'Tis the mate's," said Captain Datchett, throwing open a door. "He could bunk with me."

"It would suit us admirably."

"Would you object, madame, to be rated as stewardess?" asked the captain with a broad twinkle in his eye, and, in answer to Renie's look of surprise, indulged himself in a hearty chuckle at his own little joke.

"We have no licence to carry passengers, you see, but I could put you on the ship's books as stewardess, and pay you a shilling a month—or maybe two shillings if I found you capable and hardworking."

"I shall try to earn that higher wage. Do you provide cap and apron?"

"I will have the bo'sun rig you up," replied Captain Datchett, stretching out his joke with

naïve relish. "The hours are six to eight, with Sunday afternoons off."

"The hours and wages are satisfactory, sir, but I should like to be sure that Mr. Bo'sun understands how a fashionable apron should be cut," smiled Renie.

And so in mutual good-humour the deal was arranged. Hallard was rated as "purser," Laroche as "assistant steward," and the legal requirements of the situation were fulfilled.

Leaving Port Said at night, the *Bideford Lass*—all the Collinson boats were named "Lass"—entered the Canal with two full-powered searchlights trained ahead on either bank to make easy steering through the narrow waterway. Hallard asked permission of Captain Datchett—readily granted—to take Renie up to the crow's nest, where they could look over the high banks of the Canal and feast their eyes on the magic vision of the desert transfigured by moonlight to a sea of silver, with here and there in the distance a group of palms rising up like a solitary islet. Far away on the horizon, a range of scarped hills seemed to form a coast-line to the silver sea. The breeze made by the moving vessel carried to them a faint, acrid-sweet odour subtly suggestive of the romance of the East.

"Peace at last," murmured Hallard.

They pressed hands in silent sympathy of thought.

In a few days the simplicity of the tramp boat had so wrapped itself around them that the life of hot-house luxury and razor-witted scheming seemed buried away in some distant past. They

were now in another world of primitive, kindly homeliness. The captain and the two mates did their utmost to make them feel comfortable. The sailors and the stokers gave them a rough courtesy and many little attentions that were infinitely more pleasurable than the mercenary service of the staffs of big hotels and palace-liners. These men were not weighing up what tips they would be likely to receive; they gave service of heart in friendly freedom.

And, in return, Hallard and Renie offered what they could. They gave song-entertainments on deck at night for the men off watch; and Renie, insisting on her rating as "stewardess," overhauled the wardrobes of captain and officers to sew and darn and replace buttons where need called for them.

It was indeed a primitive Arcadia for the world-weary adventurers.



## CHAPTER XXXI.

### THE VULTURES.

THROUGH the Canal and down the Red Sea, the *Bideford Lass* plodded through a lane of sea-traffic, rarely out of touch with the vessels of fellow-men. But once past the straits of Babel-Mandeb, the course veered off from the well-trodden highway.

"We round Guardafui as close as may be," explained Captain Datchett to Renie, laying a broad forefinger on the chart, "and then it's fourteen hundred miles to Mombasa with the ocean all to ourselves. We could go to sleep on watch," he chuckled, "and never hit anything in fifty years."

"Have you ever been in a collision?" asked Renie idly.

"Never, from the time I was an apprentice; and, praise be to the Lord, my ticket's clean."

Considering the variety of the ports of the world he had visited in his seafaring career, Captain Datchett was singularly bare of adventurous

experience. He had scores of amusing incidents to relate, flavoured with his characteristic broad chuckle, but few excitements. His had been a placid life, and in due course he hoped to retire and settle down peacefully on shore in a cottage at Torquay with a garden to dig and plant.

The voyage through the Red Sea had been unseasonably cool, but after rounding Cape Guardafui, there came a torrid wind off the desert country, which is nominally Italian Somaliland, making the cabin at night suffocatingly hot.

"Let's sleep on deck," suggested Renie to her husband.

There were no ocean-liner rules to prevent them. They were free to do as they pleased on board the *Bideford Lass*. So they made their couch *à la belle étoile*.

As they were settling to sleep, a stoker was carried up fainting and laid out on deck to recover. Renie went to attend to him. When he came to himself, he made explanation for his weakness. "'Twasn't just working at the furnaces, mum. You see, we was dousing a bunker-fire as well."

"A fire!" exclaimed Renie, horrified.

"Nothing to worry over, mum," reassured the stoker. "Often get 'em with this 'ere cheap coal, all chips and dust. Sends off gas, and that lights up in the bunkers, and then we has to hose it down with steam."

"No wonder you fainted away."

"It's a bit hellish down below to-night, so to speak, mum. But don't you worry about a bunker-

fire. There's no danger. I've seen scores of 'em in my time."

Relieved in mind, Renie went back to her couch of rugs and slept peacefully.

It was on the third night of their encampment on deck that Renie roused her husband out of a deep sleep.

"What's the matter?" he murmured drowsily.

"I smell something burning."

Hallard sat bolt upright, sniffed, then hastily threw off his rug and started to investigate. The odour was coming from the hatch of a cargo-hold near by. He made quickly for the bridge, where the young second mate on watch was pacing dreamily from side to side, his thoughts far away with his girl in England.

"Fire!" called out Hallard sharply.

"Another of those blasted bunker-fires?" asked the mate disgustedly.

"No—the afterhold."

The mate leapt up at the word and followed Hallard. The smell of burning was now much stronger—unmistakable.

"By God, you're right! There must have been a plate loose in bunker three. A spurt of coal-gas into the hold!"

The sounding of the alarm-bell brought officers and crew out on deck like ants out of a nest disturbed by a stick. The after donkey-engines were started and connected up with the pumps. Discipline was admirable. Every man knew his place and obeyed orders like an automaton. They took off part of

the hatch as though at a show manoeuvre, and directed two powerful streams of water into the hold with rapid precision.

Presently came a fresh discovery. The second after-hold was also on fire. What Renie had smelt was only the vanguard of the conflagration. Deep down below, in the very bowels of the vessel, were a thousand tons of Austrian bentwood furniture in wooden packing-cases, and above that, another thousand tons of dress goods and household requisites. The fire had started in the lowest layer, and it had probably been smouldering and spreading for days before the alarm.

The crew were now divided up between the two after-holds. Action was rapid and machine-like, but still the fire gained on them. The decks were sweltering. Thick, sullen smoke began to pour out through a dozen of openings. The second engineer was detailed off to work the ship's wireless apparatus and send out an S.O.S. It had only a range of some sixty or seventy miles, but there was the bare possibility of some other vessel being within hearing.

Captain Datchett turned the ship's course due west and, piling up the furnaces, made for the coast of Italian Somaliland. He found time to pass a reassuring word to Renie: "Not far from land. Get your things together and stand by boat No. 1, in case we have to leave the ship. But don't you worry! We'll be on shore by morning in any case."

Renie had no feeling of panic. On such a quiet, peaceful, moonlit night, real danger seemed very far away. The boat accommodation was ample for

all on board. The continuous crackle and spatter of the Marconi spark, audible all along the decks, soothed with its promise of speedy help from some vessel on the high seas. Far away to the west, over the quiet waters, was the faint outline of a low shore. There would surely be no real danger.

Nevertheless, Hallard, moved by an intuitive feeling of unseen danger, took care to secure the revolver lying in his cabin trunk, and told Laroche to do the same.

Suddenly a grinding jar shook the whole vessel from end to end. The steady thud of the engines degenerated into a noisy, purposeless racket ; then died out quickly as the engineer shut off steam. The fire had warped the propeller-shaft and rendered the machinery useless.

Acting under orders, a group of sailors formed around boat No. 1. The three passengers were ordered in and the boat was lowered to the water. The other lifeboats speedily followed. The fire had won. The *Bideford Lass* was to be abandoned.

At a hundred yards' distance from the ship, the rowers rested on their oars, and all watched in silence the magnificent, epic sight of the columns of fiery smoke pouring upwards and roaring out their pæan of defiance to man. Captain Datchett wept soundlessly.

A thunderous explosion told that the fire had gained the engine-room. A second and louder explosion sent fragments sky-high like rockets, to drop in a shower on the peaceful waters. The columns of flame roared more and more fiercely.

Plates on the aft of the boat burst gaping. The sea rushed in. Five minutes later the *Bideford Lass* was dropping through the waters to her final resting-place on the bed of the Indian Ocean.

The flotilla of six boats, carrying the three passengers and the forty officers and crew, made for the land. The false dawn, glowing palely in the east, showed it as a low sandy coast with slight hills in the background—treeless and waterless. But the boats were amply provisioned with food and water—there need be no anxiety on that score.

“We’ve got rifles,” whispered Renie to her husband. “Is there any danger?”

“Only a precaution,” answered Hallard.

“Against what?”

“I don’t know—only a precaution.”

Captain Datchett called a halt while he explained to all the situation and the course of action they were to pursue. “It’s seven hundred miles to Mombasa,” he told them. “We can make that with oars and sails in less than a week. Officers in command of boats will ration provisions and water to last out ten days, in case of delay. We’ll take our course along the coast, so as to be able to get on shore if necessary.”

“To get on shore—I suppose that would be necessary if a gale should spring up?” suggested Renie.

“Yes, ma’am,” said the second mate, “that’s the idea.” But he sent a look to Hallard to ask no further questions on that point.

Captain Datchett had his three passengers



transferred to his own boat, and hoisting sail to the sea-wind of the dawn, the flotilla made southwards on their long journey.

\* \* \* \* \*

Though the wireless call for help had found no European listener within its seventy mile of range, yet the glare in the sky from the burning ship had reached the eyes of the human vultures that feed on the dying or the weaklings of the sea.

The sun was yet young in the heavens when a rower in Captain Datchett's boat called a sail to the northward. The captain had the boat lay still while he turned and adjusted his binoculars to the white speck on the northern horizon. They could see a frown of puzzlement, of hesitancy, pucker on his forehead as he watched.

Then he gave the order for the flotilla to down sails and masts and close in.

"There are two dhows over yonder sailing for where the *Bideford Lass* went down," he explained. "They may be friendly folk, but I will take no rash chance. We will make for yonder spit of land, and draw up the boats until we know for sure."

The flotilla rowed rapidly to the point indicated, and presently the party were on shore and the boats carefully concealed amongst the sand-dunes. Themselves hidden from seaward sight, officers and men and passengers watched eagerly for the coming of the two vessels which might be friend or might be foe.



There was almost an uncanny element in the certitude with which the two swift-sailing dhows made direct to the region of empty sea where the *Bideford Lass* had sunk to her grave. Soon they were picking up floating wreckage, cases and crates and the débris of the explosion, circling round and round in widening curves on the search for flotsam, and gathering in a rich harvest.

"Surely they would be glad to take us to a British port and get payment for our passage?" suggested Renie. "Even if the poor crew had no money left, we have plenty." Their ninety thousand pounds had been safely deposited in European banks, and the letters of credit they carried with them had been brought away from the burning ship and now reposed in Hallard's breast-pocket.

"Shall we tell Captain Datchett that we can easily pay passage money for everyone?" she continued.

"Wait here while I speak to him," answered Hallard. He had heard of the sea-rangers of Sokotra and their merciless ferocity, and was not surprised that Captain Datchett shook his head at the offer.

"We will bide here until they sail off," was the answer. "I would not trust a dog with those black cut-throats. But do not make the little wife anxious."

The two dhows did not, however, sail away with their harvest. As though the master-mind on board were placing himself in the situation of the crew of the sunken vessel, they made directly

for the shore and then parted company, one dhow hugging the coast to the northwards and the other dhow to the southwards, and both watching keenly for signs of a landing on the sandy shore.

Captain Datchett distributed the dozen rifles taken off from his ship. He himself and the first mate had revolvers and so had Hallard and Laroche. The marks where the boats had been dragged through the sand had been smoothed away at the time of landing. There was nothing more to be done—they must await the chance of circumstance.

The southward dhow drew nearer and nearer, sailing very close to shore. If once she passed their hiding-place, danger would be over, for the conclusion would be drawn that the *Bideford Lass* had gone down with all hands on board.

But the vulture-eye missed nothing. The falling tide had left bare the marks of the dragged boats beyond those already effaced. There came a shout from the dhow. It was discovery. Presently a column of smoke shot upwards from on board. Without doubt they were burning a signal to the northward dhow. The boat then turned into the wind and stood by, a couple of hundred yards off shore, to await the arrival of her consort.

Captain Datchett called a hurried council of war. They were hundreds of miles from any European port. Behind them and to each side was desert and thorny scrub, practically waterless. The only real chance of reaching a centre of civilisation was

by sea. Either they must endeavour to make terms of passage with the sea-rangers, or fight for their own boats. Opinion was overwhelmingly in favour of flight. It would be crass foolishness to trust to the good faith of the vultures.

"Let's take out the boats and board her before the other dhow comes up," was the young second mate's proposal.

The captain shook his head. "What would happen if we tried that?" he returned. "She would sail out of range of us till the two got together. We should be showing our numbers and nothing more."

There was a chorus of agreement.

"No," continued Captain Datchett, "we must fight on shore, lads. Pick them off before they get to close quarters."

"How much ammunition is there?" asked the first engineer.

It was strange that no one had raised that point before. It seemed too obvious to be overlooked. Yet in the hurry of departure from the ship, while a case of sporting rifles, part of the cargo, had been prudently secured, only a small packet of fifty cartridges had been brought ashore. Four rounds to each rifle would exhaust their ammunition. The revolvers had merely their chamber-charges.

A bitter silence ensued.

Hallard took the word. "The men on board that dhow have read our movements pretty accurately," he said. "Let's try to guess at their movements. The two boats join forces. They may have

a hundred men between them. Probably arms for all of them."

Captain Datchett nodded soberly. "Yes, we must reckon on that."

"But they don't know our numbers," pursued Hallard. "So they won't be rash enough to force a landing here. They will plan to move up or down the coast, get on shore, and then attack us by land. As they move, so must we follow. Stop them landing—that's the game as I see it."

Hallard's voice warmed with enthusiasm as though he were playing one of his old-time schemes against the forces of society and law. "Two lines of bluff are open to us. Either to make them think that our numbers are bigger than reality; or *less* than reality."

The circle of men hung eagerly on his words.

"The former isn't practicable unless we stop where we are and build a zareba of thorns. If we follow them up or down the coast, they must see our numbers. But if we send only a dozen or twenty men to stop their landing, those fellows will think it's our whole force. We ought to be able to hold them off till night at least."

"Yes?"

"While the rest of us, those who haven't got rifles or revolvers, take a couple of boats and slip further up or down the coast in the darkness. The moon won't rise until after midnight."

Captain Datchett laid his broad hand on Hallard's shoulder. "That's a great plan!" he said enthusiastically, and a chorus of approval backed up

his words. "Now we must choose who's to form the fighting party."

There was no man amongst them who was not eager to volunteer for the path of danger rather than stay with those who would escape in the boats during the night. The captain's eyes glowed with recognition of the spirit of his men. He announced that the mates and engineers, together with himself, would carry arms *ex officio*, and for the rest he decided that the fighting party should be taken from the unmarried members of the crew. There would be twenty in all.

"And you, sir?" he asked, turning to Hallard.

"I didn't propose this plan to save my own skin. I go with you."

"And I, too," added Renie.

It was the first word she had spoken during the discussion.

"Nonsense, madame!" returned Captain Datchett brusquely. "You will go in the boats to-night with the non-combatants."

"I insist!" retorted Renie. "If there's fighting you'll want some one to see after the wounded. I can make myself very useful."

"And I stay by madame," put in Laroche with equal firmness.

Both Hallard and the captain argued with her fiercely. Her resolution was not turned until it was urged upon her that she would be merely a drag on the fighting force. They might have to walk or run for hours along the coast-line to keep up with the sailing dhows and stave off a landing.

For a woman to do this under a burning tropical sun would be next to impossible. Reluctantly she gave in. Laroche would stay by her.

The fighting force set to work to make ready their equipment.

Noonday had brought a stillness of calm. The northern dhow, coming in answer to the smoke signal, trailed through the glassy water with limp sails. Eventually she reached her consort. The sea-rangers held long converse; then set a course, and with sweeps assisting, drew away to the northwards. Hallard's deduction was proving correct.

The fighting force of twenty gathered up their arms and their food and water supply, and with handshakes and last messages of good-bye that might possibly be for ever, loped northwards along the shore. Their line of tactics was to keep level with the position of the two dhows.

Behind them, the non-combatants lay securely hidden amongst the sandhills. The arrangement was that at nightfall they should launch two of the boats and row twenty miles to the southward; then take to the shore to await the rejoining of the others. If in three days' time the fighting party had not put in an appearance, the non-combatants, under the leadership of the boatswain, were to sail on to Mombasa. On that Captain Datchett had insisted. It would be sheer useless folly for them to do otherwise. They were unarmed, and their food and water supply was limited.

"If you don't see us in three days," he ordered, "sail on, and good luck to you!"

"You will take good care of my wife?" said Hallard to Laroche.

"*Je la garderai bien, monsieur,*" answered Laroche with deep feeling.



## CHAPTER XXXII.

### NIGHT OF HORROR.

WITH the mid-afternoon came a slightly freshening breeze. The two dhows began to draw through the rippled water with a lithe, free action. Those left behind in idleness could picture their fellows straining along the tide-level—or perhaps, more tiring still, amongst the sand-hills—in their set purpose of preventing or delaying a landing. It would be a grim, body-shattering race. Yet it was unquestionably the only line of tactics which could make possible the escape of those who, without rifles or revolvers, were helpless and useless.

Watching, they saw the two dhows grow small; then separate, one southward-hauled, one northward.

“She’s coming back to us!”

“What will the Old Man do now?”

“Split up the force—that’s what he’ll do. Ten to go on, and ten to come back.”

“No, all to come back.”

But they were wrong. Hallard, trained by his

long years of planning and scheming to accurate guesses at the workings of the minds of fellow-men, gave advice that the whole party should continue on northwards—plainly in sight of the sea-rangers—as though there were nothing of value for them to guard in the rear. It was audacious strategy, but it fulfilled its immediate object. The southward dhow turned once more and sailed after her consort. The attempted manœuvre had merely lost time for them.

A sigh of relief went up from the watchers.

Afternoon waned towards sunset. The freshening breeze died away. That would mean a respite for the leg-weary fighting force. After sundown would come the regular evening wind off the land, and whilst it would serve the sea-rangers, enabling them to outstrip the party on shore, it would also give help to those who were to escape.

The sky began to mist over with a grey film which seemed to thicken like skim upon milk. The boatswain eyed it with memories of long experience.

“A blow coming on, and a good stiff’un at that.”

“When d’you reckon she comes?”

“About ten or eleven.”

There was no glory of sunset that night. The sun crept to lair like a slinking animal. The skies were sullen and menacing in their thick clothing of red-streaked grey. It was as though they drove the sun off the stage they were setting for a drama of passion and bloodshed.

“Launch the boats,” ordered the boatswain.

Renie had sunk into a brooding silence, and when

the leader approached her with a kindly, "Now, mum, all's ready for you to step in," she answered abruptly :

"I've changed my mind. I shall stay here."

"Captain's orders is that you're to go with us, mum. You can't do any good by stopping behind."

"I've decided to stay here !"

Persuasions, arguments—all were useless. Nothing could move her from her purpose.

"Madame is right," announced Laroche, "and I will stay with her."

"It's just madness !"

Renie burst into sudden, passionate anger that was the resultant of overstrained nerves. "Go away and leave me here !" she cried with the shrillness of hysteria. "I won't leave when my husband may be fighting and wounded at this very moment ! How could you expect it ? Go, I tell you !"

"Well, our orders is to go," murmured the boatswain uncomfortably. "I can't force you to come if you won't, can I ?" He ruminated for a few moments. "Perhaps I'd better take out a third boat and lay her up a mile or so to the south'ard. Yes, I'll do that. Lord knows what's going to happen to all of us this night."

And presently : "Good-bye, mum. You're a rare plucked 'un ! I wish my daughters may grow up like you."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was about nine o'clock when Renie, standing on the shore with ears strained, caught the faint,

distant sound of rifle-fire. What was happening now? She pictured the brave little fighting-party at bay, holding their ground amongst the desert sandhills that their fellows of the crew might have the chance to escape in the darkness to civilisation and home. Fifty cartridges and three six-chambered revolvers!

A sudden growl of wind cut away the distant sounds like an interposed screen. The sand began to whirl and sting. A lull. More sounds of rapid firing. And then the storm from the desert flailed upon them in fury.

Under the lee of a boat Laroche rigged up a sail tent-fashion, and under this they crouched sleeplessly through the age-long hours of the night, while the sirocco raged around them like a myriad malignant demons. They could do nothing but wait for the morning light.

And then——? Only the finger of Providence could point their course.

Dawn came sullenly with the sun hidden by the whirling veil of yellow sand. The wind roared on—now falling, now rising to the pitch of a shrill shriek, but seemingly endless in its malignity. They re-set their apology for a tent; ate and drank; slept fitfully. And so the day dragged on to dusk and night—a night of horror when Renie's over-taxed nerves broke down into madness of hysteria, and it was all Laroche could do to prevent her rushing out into the storm to fight her way northwards to her husband's side.

The second dawn brought calm and peace. The

sirocco had spent itself ; the torn ocean lay panting in recovery.

" We will go northwards," said Renie.

They took provisions and water, and making for the easier footing of the moist shore-line, set out on their journey. Neither of the two dhows was in sight. Laroche averred that the fighting force must have beaten off the sea-rangers, or that the dhows had been blown out to sea ; but his words of comfort could not bring ease of mind to Renie. She hurried onwards in an agony of dread.

For hours they plodded on, feeling at every step the ache of the fighting party who had been forced to lope and run to keep up with the sailing dhows in that grim race.

Some twelve miles from their base, rounding a promontory of the coast-line, Renie suddenly stopped short and shrank back. An Arab in a dark burnoose lay stretched out on the sands. She judged him asleep.

But Laroche pointed up to a speck in the heavens growing rapidly larger. It was a forerunner of the vultures of the air. The Arab was dead.

And presently they came upon the scene of the big fight, where a dry watercourse and its rows of thorn-trees had seemed to offer the best chance for the little band to make their zareba. Thorn-bushes had been lopped down and piled into a rough palisade about the water-course.

Inside, it was a veritable shambles. The party had fought on to their last cartridge. Then had come the hand-to-hand battle with the sea-rangers,

evidenced by the many Arab bodies inside the enclosure. The bursting of the storm had sent the rest back to their dhows before these should be blown out to sea.

And there Renie found her husband—alive, but delirious in the agony of a fractured thigh. Of all the band of twenty only two still breathed, Hallard and Parkes, the young third mate, shot through the entrails. The rest lay stark and cramped in the rigour of death.

Overhead the vultures were gathering.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### THE ISLAND OF REST.

WITH their limited medical knowledge, Renie and Laroche had done their utmost to soothe the agony of the two wounded men ; and now a more terrible problem confronted them. How could Hallard and Parkes be moved away ?

The party in the boats were—if they had kept to the plan arranged—some thirty miles distant. The other boats were twelve miles away. But, drawn up as they were amongst the sandhills, it would be impossible for Laroche unaided to launch one. Nor would Renie leave her husband—moaning deliriously for water, and ever more water—to accompany him.

They must carry the two wounded away from this scene of shambles, to a place of shade further up the dry watercourse ; and then Laroche must set out to tramp the thirty miles to the boat party. So Renie ordered.



“ But, madame, to leave you here through the night with the vultures around ! ”

“ It is the only way,” decided Renie.

He set out with dogged stride on that weary journey.

In all the tragedy which followed the burning of the *Bideford Lass*, no moment was more poignant than when Laroche, arriving exhausted at the stretch of coast-line where the boat-party should have been located, found no trace of them. They had in fact been caught by the swift suddenness of the sirocco, and blown out from shore before they had time to make a landing. They were at sea, it was afterwards learnt, through that thirty-six hour gale, and when calm arrived, they were separated from one another and hundreds of miles distant from the fighting force. One boat made on to Mombasa ; one returned in the hope of giving help, but found only the dead and the vultures. Both eventually reached the safety of port—the sacrifice of the fighting twenty had not been in vain.

\* \* \* \* \*

Laroche slept the sleep of exhaustion for six hours ; then started to tramp back through the night to Renie. Arrived at the deserted boats, he tried fruitlessly to move one into the water. It was beyond his strength. But the idea came to him to convert one of the sails and a couple of gaff-poles into a stretcher-hammock, and with this he went onwards to Renie.

Parkes had died during the night ; Hallard was still in fever, yet calmer and with less pain. They placed him in the sail-hammock, and between them, though with many stops and rests, they covered the twelve miles back to the boats. Then began the labour of launching. It was impossible to get any one of the three boats from the sand-hills to the water ; but the fourth, beached a mile to the southward by the prudent thought of the boat-swain, proved easier of handling, and at high tide they managed the task.

Hallard was lifted on board ; the remainder of the water and the provisions were stowed away ; and the seven hundred mile voyage to the southward began.

The safety of all now rested in the hands of Laroche. Hallard was still sick with fever, while Renie, exhausted by the horrors of her experience, only clung to reason by sheer force of will. Laroche had to sail, steer, navigate, and attend to his master and mistress by day and by night, snatching what rest he could in the times of noonday calm. His aim was to hug the coast-line. For four days he managed to keep to this with success, until a black night of tropical storm snapped the mast and drove them out to the open sea.

Then they lost their bearings completely. There was only the sun to guide their course, and in what direction the ocean currents might be carrying them was impossible to reckon. A week later, when the failing water was filling their hearts with despair and the emptiness of ocean mocked them with its

bland serenity, they sighted a low black smear on the eastern horizon—the Island.

With a last effort of sheer will triumphing over aching muscle and throbbing nerve, Laroche rowed them to the land where dark-green palm and crystal-white beach gave invitation of safety and rest.

\* \* \* \* \*

Renie lay dying. Storm and drenching spray, torrid sun and parching throat, the terror of slow death by thirst piled on that fortnight of terror—these had crushed her like a flower under the heel of some blindly trampling fate. Will had kept her alive until they were safely on land, with shade and water in abundance ; but now that the struggle was past, her spirit gave in. It was in vain that Hallard assured her that presently, when she had regained her strength, they would re-stock the boat with provisions and water, step a new mast, and sail westwards to the continent of Africa. They were certain to reach Mombasa or Zanzibar. Perhaps even before they left some vessel would pass within sight and catch their signals.

But she could not struggle to live. Rest and peace were now her needs. And in the perfect beauty of that tiny island, she slowly sank.

Hallard, torn with remorse, reproached himself bitterly with having drawn her into his life of crime ; but she would not listen to such words.

“ You gave me love, *chéri*, and fidelity, and all that your money could buy. I could not want

more. I was your partner in the big game. You have been so good to me, *chéri*—and Laroche, who could have been a more faithful and devoted friend? Call him for me.”

Laroche came to her couch with tears brimming his eyes, and taking the wasted hand that Renie held out to him, he kissed it reverently in a last good-bye.

## EPILOGUE.

Hallard and Laroche found their way eventually to the mainland and civilisation. But there was now no savour for them in a life of civilised luxury. Though a capital of ninety thousand pounds could buy them almost any pleasures, it could not command happiness. After a year of restless, unsatisfied wandering about the earth, Hallard bought himself a yacht, stocked it with material for building, and went in search of the Island where Renie had been laid to rest under the stately guardianship of the sentinel palms. There he erected a bungalow sufficient for simple needs; and there he and Laroche settled to live except at such times as they cruised their yacht over to the mainland to restock with provisions and books and the other necessities of existence.

It was on the Island that John Hallard gave me the story of his career of adventure—a simple, straightforward narrative here translated into the

medium of dialogue and description. Had he not told me, I should never have recognised him as the easy-going *dilettante*, the "Sir Ralph Kenrick" of our first meeting at Monte Carlo.

Life had seared him.

He had won through to the money-goal at which he aimed; but in the winning he had lost what money could never replace.

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